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UPROOTED FROM HIS FOOTHOLD, OLD GRIP WAS UNCEREMONIOUSLY HURLED
INTO THE ABYSS.

OR, THE BANK ROBBER'S ROUND-UP.

BY JACKSON KNOX, (OLD HAWK.)

CHAPTER I.

THE MOUNTAIN ROAD.

MID-AFTERNOON of a dull, threatening October day, in the upper, semi-mountainous part of Westchester county, within twenty-five or thirty miles of the New York City boundary line, after a season of stormy rains, which had badly washed and gullied the country roads, rugged and uncared-for at their best, besides perceptibly hastening the rich autumnal tints of the woods.

A countrified-appearing man of middle age, accompanied by an odd-looking little fellow, boyish in size but mannish of visage, and with four huge milk-cans lashed in the rear of the seat, was driving in a buckboard wagon over

the Whippoorwill Road, one of the craggiest and most breakneck of the pseudo-highways of that decidedly craggy and breakneck region.

"Humph!" muttered the man, reining up a little at the head of a particularly steep and crooked descent. "Three days in this accursed, chaw-bacon country-side, without so much as a sniff of our fugitive yet. And there's the Haunted House once more, which I had expected so much of—ramshackle and forbidding and deserted-looking as ever!"

Suddenly his companion grasped his arm as the wagon made a sudden lurch to one side, accompanied by a shying movement of the horse—a sorry-looking, shaggy brute, with many a burdock burr in his mane and tail.

"Easy there, boss, or we're into that gully!" he cried. "Gosh! mighty! how the water *does* rush along here!"

The other righted the vehicle by a skillful and powerful movement of the guiding hand.

The house alluded to was a singularly isolated and lonely one.

It was perched considerably back from the road on a rocky little side-rise out of the wild and craggy hollow in which they were descending.

Its neglected, weed-grown grounds backed against a sheer and broken line of rugged, inaccessible-seeming cliffs, suggestive alike of snakes and eagles, a narrow foot-bridge at their lower edge crossing the gully-water that came tearing and frothing by like a mill-race.

"Hush!" whispered the buckboard driver, easing up with a slow pull at the foot of the hill.

A woman had unexpectedly stepped out of the uncanny house.

Motioning them to stop, she was coming toward them with a letter in her hand.

A robust, graceful figure, poorly clad; a head and face perhaps attractive, but almost wrapped out of sight by an old plaid shawl.

"Please, sir!" she called out, crossing the bridge, "are you going to Chappaqua with your milk? And if you are, will you post this letter for me?"

"Lor', ma'm!" cried the man, with a sudden bumpkin-like awkwardness of voice and manner; "how you *did* startle we-uns! We took you for a ghost."

There was an impatient flash from a pair of very bright and black eyes back under the ragged fringes of the improvised hood.

"Poverty isn't a chooser, my man," she replied, as if forcing herself to an explanation, "and even a haunted roof is better than none. Besides, this one happens to be mine—a family possession."

"Oh, Lor', ma'm! and be you the lady what was borned here, an' left the place to go to rack an' ruin so many years ago?"

"Yes, yes; and I have noticed you passing and repassing for several days. But you haven't answered my request."

"By Jukes! neither I have. Do forgive me, ma'm; for I'm nat'rally sort of skeery an' creepish, you see. Will I post the letter for you at Chappaqua? Why, of course, ma'm, and welcome! I'd even take it to the city for you, if it mought be meant for some one in York, ma'm."

The woman scrutinized him with a swift, piercing look.

"Where have you been employed?" she demanded, with a sudden superiority of tone and manner.

"Back Armonk-ways, ma'm, on old Grubman's big milk-farm," was the reply.

"And you are quitting your employment?"

"Yes, ma'm. Ten hours a day, with starving wages, hard grub and worse cider, sort of broke us up. So me and little Jimmy here done gived the old man notice last night. And now, arter shippin' these cans an' takin' on the empty ones, we be going to stall this crow-bait in Tompkins's stable, accordin' to orders, an' then light out for the big city, where they do say as how a likely brace of fellers such as we-uns kin git rich in less'n no time."

"But you haven't any baggage with you?" suspiciously, after a glance over the wagon and its contents.

"Haw! haw! haw!" guffawed the man, while his little companion sympathetically grinned from ear to ear. "No, ma'm; we don't ginerally have what we hain't got."

"You may not find it so easy to get rich in the great city as you imagine."

"Oh, p'r'aps not, ma'm," with a knowing leer. "But I'm up to snuff, ma'm, and little Jimmy here 'll be under my wing."

"You have already lived in the city, then?"

"For several years, ma'm. Druv a milk-route for two of 'em, and then was stableman's assistant with the hoss-cars at a dollar and a quarter a day. A dollar—and—a-quarter! Think of it, ma'm! Jeewhiz! how 'd I drift back up here in Westchester ag'in? I've been clubbin' myself with that question ever since; but now I'm back for old York in a bee-line, you bet!"

"It might be safer," said the woman, half to herself, "to communicate with him by hand than by mail."

"Then she asked aloud: "What is your name, sir?"

"Thomas Cook, ma'm."

"Do you know the city pretty well?"

"Like a book, ma'm! Druv a milk-route, fu'st in Harlem, then down in Yorkville, then in the old eighth ward, and then—"

She interrupted him with a sharp gesture and handed him the letter in her hand.

"Read that address," she said, "and tell me if you can deliver the letter without delay this evening."

The letter was plainly addressed, in a bold though feminine hand, to "Mr. Henry Moresby, Care Etna Steam Laundry, — East 85th street, New York."

But the man turned it over and over in his brown hands with a nonplused, sheepish look, and then scratched his head without replying.

"What! perhaps you can't read?" eagerly exclaimed the woman.

"Well, you see, ma'm, some folks's eddycation hez been 'tended to, while then ag'in some other folks's—"

"I kin!" pipingly interposed the man's weazen-faced little companion, with a great air of pride. "I kin, please, ma'm, if Tom can't."

And, snatching the letter, he slowly, but accurately spelled out the superscription, word by word.

"He's an awful learnt boy, ma'm," commented the man, repossessing himself of the letter. "Aha! but eddycation's a big thing—when it hain't been neglected."

"You can carry the letter to the address now?"

"Sartain, ma'm! East 85th street, eh? Why, it's in my fu'st milk-route!"

"You must be sure that no one suspects you of having the letter till you reach the Etna Steam Laundry. It's very important."

The man gravely nodded and put the letter carefully away in an inside pocket.

"If Mr. Moresby should not be on hand to receive it, you will leave it for him with Mrs. Griscom, the forewoman of the establishment."

"Yes, ma'm."

"And, in either case, upon your relating the circumstances under which you have been chosen my messenger, you will receive five dollars for your trouble."

Both man and boy looked at the woman half-aghast, wide-mouthed and staring-eyed.

"Five dollars!" all but yelled the man.

"D'ye mean it, ma'm?"

"I do," smiling.

"Gee up, and git along there, Dobbin! Five dollars! Jeewhiz! didn't I say old York war the place to git rich in on the hop, skip and jump! All right, ma'm. Yourn furever, until death do us part, is old Tom Cook!"

And, with an enthusiastic crack of the whip, horse, buckboard and occupants were up and away along the lonely road, while the woman returned to her strange abode with an air of having concluded an unexpectedly satisfactory bargain.

No sooner, however, had a turn in the road been reached, not far away, than the horse was unceremoniously guided into a leafy forest opening near at hand.

Here the man tossed the reins to his companion and briskly leaped to the ground.

"Just as I hoped all along!" he exclaimed, rapidly shedding his outer garments, piece by piece. "Maud Markham, alias Margaret Shipman, herself! The clew, Cheese-it, the longed-for clew! Whoever this 'Henry Moresby' may be, I'm pretty certain it can't be Claude Markham, alias Clarence Shipman, her suspected bank-thief of a husband. He's like enough nearer at hand; though that is what I must make sure of. Wait here!"

In the mean time, the personality of the gawky countryman had disappeared to give place to that of our erstwhile acquaintance, Edward Crimmins, otherwise Old Grip, the Detective!

CHAPTER II.

A SECRET OF THE ROCKS.

HAVING effected this transformation, the detective straightway sprang in among the trees, and began to scale a steep promontory, or spur, of the adjoining rocks, which now separated this improvised little wayside nook from the Haunted House.

Old Grip was no less agile at cliff-clambering than in his various other fields of activity.

In less than ten minutes, he had gained a dizzy, bush-masked outlook on the side of the main crag, a few paces from a scarcely perceptible path or trail winding up from below, and commanding the rear of the old house, with its contiguous grounds.

Not a moment too soon.

Hardly had he settled himself in his nook before the rear door opened, and the woman stepped out upon a rickety little porch, or covered landing, connecting it with the beginning of the path at the foot of the hill.

Her head and face, no longer concealed by the disfiguring shawl, were those of a superbly handsome woman of thirty or thereabouts—a nobly beautiful brunette, with brilliant black eyes, resolute but delicately-chiseled features, shining black and abundant hair, becomingly

arranged, and a rich, glowing complexion suggestive of a sun-browned peach.

There was a corresponding elegance and even queenliness in her tall, graceful figure, despite her cheap and seemingly ill-fitting gown.

Her entire demeanor was intensely watchful and alert, with swiftly-suspicious glances that seemed to take in her entire surroundings with a comprehensive, yet microscopic sweep, and she carried in one hand a large basket, covered with a clean white napkin neatly tucked in at he edges.

"So!" thought the observant detective; "provisions for her fugitive husband, somewhere hidden away among these rocky solitudes, or I'm a sinner. Aha! but will she suspect that the bank-thief's Nemesis will be silently shadowing her on this revealing mission?"

Apparently satisfied that the loneliness of her retreat was inviolable, the woman set down her basket.

Then, by a sudden movement, her gown was parted down the middle from throat to feet, and she stepped out of it in masculine attire—as fair-seeming a young tourist as ever disported in trim jacket and knickerbockers, alpenstock in hand, or joined in a 'cross-country rush with a hare and hounds club.

Only an appropriate head-covering was lacking, and this she straightway provided out of a little closet at the end of the porch, in the shape of a broad-brimmed, light-colored wide-awake hat, which put the finishing touch upon her picturesque transformation.

Then, tossing the discarded gown into the closet, she picked up the basket and at once set out up the path, wasting upon that desert air (save for the concealed detective's spying eyes) as pretty and jaunty a picture of youth-aping femininity as ever a stage Rosalind put forth for public approval in the comedy of "As You Like It."

No play-acting here, however; for as she tripped up the path the detective caught the gleam of a revolver-butt from the hip-pocket of the knickerbockers; and, moreover, there was a set, anxious look on the dark, resolute face that betokened a full consciousness of danger and difficulty possible at any turn.

Scarcely had Old Grip made these reflections before the trim figure flitted past his nook, springing lightly and strongly as directly up the face of the mountain as the crookedness of the faint trail would admit.

A moment later, after due allowances for her to get well on in advance, he was following with a silent, sleuthing step up the trail.

This momentarily grew more difficult and arduous.

Indeed, on his taking up his temporary residence thereabouts several days previous, Old Grip had been surprised; as is nearly every one on visiting those parts for the first time, at the wildness and savagery of the semi-mountainous scenery as existing at but an hour's railroad jog northward from the metropolis.

But even he was scarcely prepared for the rugged desolateness through which that brief chase up the face of Whippoorwill Mountain so swiftly led him.

There were gloomy chasms and gorges one after another; precipices hundreds of feet high, along the ragged brinks of which the path wound like a tangled thread; and many another forbidding and yet grand feature of crag and forest that one would have more readily imagined of the heart of the Rocky Mountains or the Sierra Nevadas themselves, than in that old-time Revolutionary strip of the zigzag Connecticut border; with perhaps a well-to-do farm-house, or a little shoemaking hamlet, nestling here and there, to left or right, almost anywhere within gunshot, if the wanderer thereamong only knew the way to spy or search for it.

The pursuer was seemingly as light of foot and strong of step as the unsuspecting fugitive, and, guided by the faint sound of her progress in advance, though with seldom a glimpse of her clambering form, he kept on patiently, doggedly and noiselessly in her track.

At last, however, and just as he was threading the verge of a steep, deep gorge, thickly overgrown with bushes and stunted trees, his ear caught a cessation in the guiding sounds, and he came to a dead stop in a crouching attitude, his hearing strained to the utmost.

Yes; there could be no doubt of it.

The woman had come to a sudden pause, and now he could hear a low murmuring, as of voices in cautious converse.

Eager to overhear, he was about to continue creeping along the dizzy path, when a most frequent and dangerous denizen of those Westchester rock-wilds—a copperhead snake—skulked out of a cranny to the left, and coiled itself threateningly before him.

The detective started back; then, with a swift, silent movement, crushed the sluggish reptile's penny-shaped head under his grinding heel.

But the detention, brief as it had been, was sufficient for him to miss the greater part of what he had been so anxious to overhear.

This was all he caught and that in the woman's voice:

"I will find him there then. You patrol back,

along the trail, to guard against the mere possibility of my steps having been dogged. You know that last word I had from Moresby warned me of Old Grip, the Detective, being on the scent somewhere hereabouts."

Then there was only the speaker's footsteps, rapidly and lightly, on up among the yet wilder rocks.

What mysterious patrol had she thus halted to exchange words with *en passant*?

Not another sound, save those of her own retreating footsteps up the height; and those were growing fainter and fainter—were now gone.

Still on the verge of the dizzy gorge, the detective was about to hurry on in pursuit ere the object of his quest should vanish, when there was a sort of snarl, the parting of the sumac boughs directly in front, and he was abruptly confronted by an ominous and formidable shape.

It was that of Moses Crust, otherwise the Hermit of the Rocks, or the Wild Shoemaker of Whippoorwill.

This was a strange and eccentric character of the country-side, almost as notorious in his way as, though less widely known than, the "Old Leather Man" himself.

None knew of his exact abode, save that it was in some mysterious den up among the wild snake, fox and skunk-haunted intricacies of the rock-wilderness thereabouts.

The man assumed to be mildly insane, made his appearance at uncertain periods among the village and farm folks to dispose of his snake-oil for harness-dressing or as a specific, and was suspected of being responsible for the numerous pious injunctions, such as, "Come to Jesus!" "Repent or be Damned!" *et al.*, which had for years mysteriously stenciled the roadside rocks and fences throughout a rather wide range of country.

Old Grip had never met this queer character before, though hearing much of him, and was now hardly less surprised, not to say startled, than if as abruptly confronted by the Jibben-onasay himself, the whilom renowned hero of that old-time Indian romance, "The Nick of the Woods."

Gigantic in size and cadaverous of aspect, the hermit was grotesquely garbed in fluttering rags.

His white-bearded face wore a set melancholy, almost mild expression, but his eyes, glaring out from amid scattered elf-locks of grayish hair, were fierce with a stern, suspicious light, and the grimy hand which he suddenly laid upon the detective's arm seemed as formidable as the paw of a grizzly bear.

"Spyin' an' snoopin' an' dodgin', eh?" muttered this queer character, with a certain menace in his voice and manner. "Oh ho! the detective, and I'm bettin' on it! Young feller, better repent or be damned, fur Eternity is before yer!"

CHAPTER III.

SOMETHING OF A SET-BACK.

"ALLOW me to proceed, if you please, my good man," said Old Grip, calmly. "The path is narrow, as you will perceive—"

He was interrupted by the Hermit suddenly seizing him in his mighty embrace, with a harsh laugh.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the latter. "Path nar-rer, eh? Should say it was, with the vengeance of the Eternal above, and the Bottomless Pit beside it! Into it you go, my precious devil!"

The detective could contend with the man's all but superhuman strength but for a fleeting instant.

Athletic, courageous, skilled in the pugilist's and wrestler's art as he was, and with no opportunity for drawing his revolver, he was no more in that tremendous grip than a dry branch in the maw of a whirlwind.

Uprooted from his foothold, Old Grip was unceremoniously hurled into the abyss, while high over the precipitous ledge rose the strange being's maniacal laugh, ruthless and insensate as the tempest's above the sailor doomed.

There was a crash, as the detective went falling through the bushes outgrowing from the upper side of the chasm, then a yet louder crash, a sudden shock and wrench, and his plunge was stayed.

Stretching out his arms, and struggling into a half-sitting, half-suspended attitude, Old Grip looked about him.

He was midway down in a thick-bowering tree-top at the bottom of the gorge.

Fortunately, however—you might almost say miraculously—he was without serious bruise or injury of any description, save some slight scratches on his hands and neck.

To scramble down from his involuntary perch, and then out of the deep and narrow cleft or gorge in which he found himself, was but the work of a few minutes.

Then, after a turn or two around the corner of a great rock, he found himself, much to his surprise, in a piece of comparatively open ground, with the rear of the Haunted House not only once more in sight, but close at hand.

His pursuit of the fugitive had evidently led him unawares high up among the rocks, though

never at any time to any considerable distance, in a lateral direction, from his starting-point at the foot of the hill.

Hardly had he made these observations when steps were heard re-descending the adjacent path.

Then he just had time to conceal himself when Maud Markham, carrying her basket, now empty, and accompanied by the hermit, made her appearance, with the pleased and assured air of having accomplished a difficult mission thoroughly and well.

"Wait, my sister!" said the Hermit, coming to a sudden pause at the foot of the rocks, and touching his companion's arm with his massive hand. "Here, as thou knowest, we must separate."

The woman, who was looking shapelier than ever in her trim tourist's costume, which advantaged her fine figure so picturesquely, turned toward him a glowing face, in which there was a sympathetic mingling of commiseration and attachment.

"Nay, Moses," she replied. "But come with me first into the house, that we may converse more at our ease."

Moses frowned and shook his head.

"Not so, my sister," he made answer. "There can be little more for us to say at present. And, moreover, thou knowest I have long since forsworn the habitations of sinful man."

"But, Moses," with a laugh, "the old house now is but the habitation of ghosts, if one may believe the gossip of the ignorant."

"I know, I know!" decidedly; "but not even therein will I enter."

"As if we were not both born in it, in the old sweet Long Ago, when the world and its wickedness were as nothing, or unguessed!"

He again shook his head more peremptorily than before.

"And," she went on, half-railingly, "as if you didn't secretly fit up the old rooms and their furniture for my re-occupancy, when, terrified and hunted, I brought my beloved and persecuted one hereabouts for hiding?"

"The Lord permitted, and your emergency was great, my little sister. Fear not but that I will continue to watch over thee; but now we must separate. My pious duties and my unfinished prayers summon me commandingly to my hermit's cell."

"But wait! This man, this spy whom you so fortunately intercepted, think you he was the remorseless detective we have such cause to dread?"

"I know he was stealthily tracking thee, which was enough for me."

"What was he like?"

"How should I know or care? I gripped and hurled him on the instant, powerful and sinewy as he proved, though of no avail against me, of course."

"Nay; but you must have remarked something of the man's appearance?"

"Perhaps so; such vanities will force themselves upon even the most godly at times."

"What was he to look upon, my brother?"

"Middle-aged, handsome and dark, the form of an athlete, the eye of an eagle, a voice low, softly modulated, and yet with a steely ring therein suggestive of the blade of steel within the velvet scabbard, agile of movement, resolute of look, a jaw of iron, lips secret and compressed. There, there! Vanities, vanities, all vanities!"

The woman had clinched her hand, a troubled frown gathering upon the dark, comely face, as perceived under her slouched hat-brim.

"The same!" she exclaimed, in a choking, resentful voice; "Old Grip himself, the iron detective. But,"—eagerly—"you hurled him to destruction, Moses—you are sure of that?"

A look of fanatical satisfaction crossed the Hermit's wild, Lear-like visage.

"Verily, the ways of the unrighteous are toward the yearning pits," he replied, with a species of exalted chuckle, "and the devil has got his own!"

"Nay, nay!" with some impatience; "these rhapsodies apart, are you sure, Moses, that he was hurled to death?"

"Sure as Sin, sure as Salvation itself, little sister!" phlegmatically. "He went plunging right into the heart of the chasm, and as near as I could estimate directly at the spot where the deep pit opens its gaping jaws near the foot of the great tree in its rocky floor. Ha, ha, ha! Dost not remember, when thou wast but a child, how I was wont to tumble the great stones therein, and how thy sunburned little face would pale and thy black eyes stare to hearken to their downward reverberations grow fainter and fainter till lost amid the soundless depths that seemed to have no bottom?—A fit earthly type, my dear," complacently, "of that Bottomless pit of the Hereafter, that immeasurable flame-crypt of punishment into which the souls of the recalcitrant and the damned are irretrievably hurled, there to remain, howling, scorching and sizzling forever and ever! Dost remember?"

Maud gave a shudder, which was more than reflected by the concealed listener, who had remarked the pit-entrance alluded to in his first descent out of the saving treetop in the gorge, and was now first made aware, through these

gloating and fanatical words, of the additional narrowness of his escape from death.

"Do I remember?" repeated the young woman. "I should say so! And now, to think of a human being, a fellow creature— But no!" with a passionate gesture and sudden effacement of a remorseful expression that had fleetingly leaped into manifestation; "the ruthless, the implacable sleuth-hound! Would he not have hounded my beloved, my innocent Claude, into State Prison gates?"

"Aha! But, since you are so sure of your husband's innocence of crime, were it not as well, little sister, for him to follow my first advice?"

"What! give himself up to the minions of the law?"

"Just so, little sister."

"That they might convict him upon the hired false testimony of his whilom evil associates?—my wifely curse upon their coward heads!"

"Not so; but that he might prove his innocence, and perhaps, in doing so, bring the real bank robbers to justice."

"Moses, in the present public and police temper, it would be impossible. Moresby is sure of it."

"Aha, that Moresby you talk about and trust so implicitly—a satanic agent in disguise, perhaps!"

"No; but my husband's truest friend. Claude is sure of it."

"Humph! and yet a man of mystery and many names, according to your own acknowledgments."

"True," half-reluctantly. "A strange and a mysterious man, but still our friend."

"Well, well; time will discover that. And this man still advises concealment?"

"Yes; at least until I can hear from him again. I dispatched a letter by a private messenger to him to-day—a simple, honest-looking countryman, on his way to the city—and should receive a reply from him within forty-eight hours at the furthest."

CHAPTER IV.

WINGED WORDS.

THE Hermit of the Rocks remained buried in thought for a moment, and then said, sententiously:

"The Lord's will be done, little sister! for doth He not hold the fates of men and nations and worlds in the hollow of His hand?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so, Moses," responded the young woman, a little wearily, for the grotesque devoutness of her companion seemed to arouse her impatience no less than her compassion. "But what has all that got to do with our misfortunes and distresses?"

"What! in mingled condemnation and pity; such a query, and from thy lips, little sister! Sacrilege and blasphemy—blasphemy, and nothing else! Look here!"

He produced from somewhere among his rags an oblong package, wrapped in oilskin.

Opening this upon a flat-topped bowlder near at hand, he took from its interior first some marking-brushes, together with several color-slabs of different hues, and then a large collection of stencil-plates.

Selecting one of these latter, with an air of great gravity and discrimination, he next seized the brush, rubbed it hard upon one of the color-cakes, and then, turning to a huge broad-sided rock near at hand, deftly transferred thereon, in large, bright-blue lettering, the stenciled injunction: "VENGEANCE IS MINE, SAITH THE LORD!"

"There you are!" he exclaimed, turning triumphantly to his companion. "Oh, glory, glory! but doesn't that thrill you to the marrow, little sister! But, just hold your horses a minute!"

Another selection from the plates, the application of a fresh brush supplied with color from a different pigment, and there was fixed upon the rock-face, directly beneath the first, a second inscription in vivid pink lettering: "FOR OF SUCH IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN. AMEN!"

"Oh, but it's glorious, glorious!" shouted the Wild Shoemaker of Whippoorwill, in stentorian tones, his eyes blazing, his white beard seeming to fairly bristle, with excitement. "Ain't you enthused, little sister, ain't you fairly slopping over with the divine truth of it?"

"No, I'm not," replied the young woman, bluntly. "In fact, it seems to me a poor, pitiful sort of heaven into which the spirit of vengeance can have any abiding-place. Rest, happiness and mercy for all seem to me infinitely preferable. However," she extended her hand, "you said that we must separate. So be it, at least for the present, brother Moses."

But, he had slowly gathered up his strange proselyting paraphernalia, and was regarding her with a puzzled expression, as if his few remaining wits had suddenly gone wool-gathering.

"Hold on, little sister!" he said slowly. "Let me see; what was it I wished to ask? Besides, perhaps it isn't wholly your fault that Claude and you are among the lost and damned. You see, comparatively few of us can be among the fortunate elect— Ah, I have it! That bank-robbery, of which your poor husband is

suspected, and which you once gave me some details of!"

"Well, Moses?"

"The bank watchman, who was so murderously assaulted, you know?"

"Yes."

"Is he still alive?"

"Yes," sadly, "and slowly recovering from the physical shock, I understand, in the hospital, but with his reason, it is feared, hopelessly clouded."

"Bad, bad, bad! It is only we of the powerful brains, the gifted mentalities, who can fully appreciate such dire misfortune as that. But, let me see," wholly oblivious of her pitying little smile, "there was something else. Ah, the stolen money and bonds! Anything recovered, as yet?"

"Not that I know of. Would to God," fervently, "it might all be recovered, and the black mystery, which now darkens around my husband, cleared up at last!"

"Humph! Truth is mighty and will prevail! And, weren't there some letters included in the stolen property?"

"Yes." And the handsome face under the slouched hat-brim fell to blushing, not only angrily and deeply, but altogether unaccountably.

"Some private letters, presumably upon delicate matters, belonging to Mr. Goldkirk, president of the bank, whose loss is supposed to have caused him more secret anxiety than that of the money and bonds themselves?"

"It is so alleged, Moses."

"And your husband, Claude Markham's, known desire to get those letters in his custody—wasn't that the principal fact, together with his evil associations, that caused this unpleasant suspicion to rest upon him?"

"Yes, yes! Oh!" with a fresh gust of passion; "why do you bring up these miserable entanglements that you seem to be well enough acquainted with already? Yes, yes; true, all true! And, before we were married, Claude had been Goldkirk's private secretary, as I had been his daughter's governess. And he," bitterly, "the smooth-tongued scoundrel—the bore, who so beseeched me to become his second wife—he, Goldkirk, the traitor, was, or professed to be, our benefactor and friend, as he has become our persecutor and our enemy! What more, Moses, do you want, or would you have?"

A species of suppressed fury had hurried her along, and now that it was over she was spent and pale, her bosom rising and falling tumultuously, her whole frame agitated under its masculine habiliments.

"Little sister, forgive me!" said the Hermit, brokenly. "You see, I am naturally over-inquisitive as to the ways of the wicked world; and since all flesh is grass, little sister—"

She interrupted him with a tender gesture, and again held forth her shapely hand.

He pressed it and she was gone, darting away like a deer in the direction of the old house, wherein she at once disappeared.

There had been nothing of this strange scene and stranger colloquy lost upon the concealed detective.

He waited impatiently till the Wild Shoemaker of Whippoorwill had disappeared up the mountain path, after disfiguring two or three more prominent rocks with his Scriptural quotations.

Then the tireless shadower cautiously approached the old house, and noiselessly ascending the rickety porch, peered in at the kitchen window.

Maud Markham was within, having resumed, outwardly, at least, the garments proper to her sex.

She had put a pot to boil on a small stove, in which a fire was burning briskly, and was now seated at an opposite window engaged in the prosaic occupation of peeling a painful of potatoes.

But her unconsciously graceful attitude seemed to invest even this drudgery with a species of dignity, and there was a soft, melancholy light on the dark, thoughtful face.

Old Grip gazed upon this woman with a new and softened interest.

"Can it be," he muttered, "that I, too, have been on the wrong scent—that this unhappy woman and her fugitive husband are more sinned against than sinning, after all?"

He stole away, regained the retreat in which he had left Cheese-it with the wagon, after an absence of about one hour altogether, and once more assuming his discarded disguise, sprung into the seat.

"We have no time to lose," was the only explanation he vouchsafed to his little companion. "Get along, Dobbin!"

His story upon receiving the letter from Maud Markham had been strictly true as to the recent employment of Cheese-it and himself, their self-discharge thence, and their destination.

Half an hour later, just at dusk, they had taken their seats in a down train from Chappaqua, after having disposed of their equipage and its load as had been intimated in the intention.

"Boss!" Cheese-it presently ventured to remark, perhaps as a sort of feeler for his principal's present temper.

"Well?" rather encouragingly.

"I suppose I'll have to go with you to deliver that letter—as a sort of steerer, you know, and to do the translation, seein' as how your eddycation has been neglected."

"Well, rather."

"But it was something else I was bent on asking, boss."

"Why don't you ask it then?"

"Have I your permission?"

"Yes."

"Well, ain't you going to glance at the contents of the letter before delivering it?"

"No."

"Thank you, boss!" and Cheese-it settled himself into his accustomed quietude and resignation.

Old Grip, however, smiled a little grimly at the disappointment which he knew his companion was masking under his placid exterior.

"It isn't necessary," he deigned to explain at last. "I can guess well enough at the letter's purport, my lad. The thing to note will be the man to whom it is addressed, and his manner of receiving it."

"I'm on to it, boss," was the quiet response.

An hour or so later on, they were before the Etna Steam Laundry, which seemed to be quite an extensive establishment, in which quite as much work was going on by night as by day.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE STEAM LAUNDRY.

UPON asking at the main entrance for Mrs. Griscom, the forewoman, the *pseudo*-countryman and his companion were guided through a long, low work-room in which numbers of young women and a few Chinamen were at work directing the ironing out of countless collars and cuffs by steam-power.

The young women, especially, were very sunny-minded young persons, who did not hesitate to gey the rustic-appearing visitors unmercifully as they passed.

"What sort of jobs are you looking for, pretties?" called out one.

"Wrong shop for chaw-bacons!" cried another. "Don't shampoo hayseed out of sap-heads hereaway!"

"Catch on to the old 'un's whiskers!" cried a third. "Socrates in an onion-patch, sure!"

"Oh, he's all right!" piped up yet another—a very pretty work-girl with merry eyes and sarcastic lips. "You rather want a microscope for the shrimp's base-ball mustache."

And so it went on, the *pseudo*-Thomas Cook making believe to be greatly abashed, though "Jimmy" did not hesitate to give back as good as was sent.

"Silence!" at last exclaimed, with much sternness, an elderly woman who suddenly appeared in a doorway. "There'll be more solid work and less gabble in this work-room, or I'll know who's boss, you or I!"

The gibing tongues were as if paralyzed, each of their owners assuming at once a demure intensity of interest in the work in hand that was truly praiseworthy to see.

"That's Mrs. Griscom," rather fearsomely whispered the little boy who had been acting as the visitors' guide. "And you want to mind out," he added, in a yet lower voice to Cheese-it, as being somewhat of his own size. "She's a holy terror on wheels, she is!"

"Want to see me?" called out the woman, sharply. "No new hands to be taken on, if that's what you're looking for."

"Jee-Hossiphat, ma'm!" contemptuously guffawed the countryman; "we ain't washerwomen nor clothes-wringers."

"Not by a blamed sight!" "Jimmy" oared in. "We're private messengers, we are! Tummas, you can't read; show me the letter, and I'll read the top-writing right out fur the lady."

The woman's demeanor at once softened.

"What! you have a letter for me?" she said, in a changed voice. "Come in and be seated, I beg of you. Sammy," to the boy guide, "set out chairs for the gentleman and his son."

And this was accordingly done, after she had politely bowed the visitors into the dingy little office where she presided.

The elder of the visiting pair burst into a fresh guffaw.

"Hu!" he explained; "I ain't a gentleman, ma'm. I'm Thomas Cook, of Whippoorwill Holler, an' this here boy ain't my son, but only my chum."

"You kin bet I ain't no such lunk-head's son, ma'm!" supplemented Cheese-it, with a loftily-injured air. "I'm—I'm a Bourbon prince in disguise, mum—that's me!"

"Sammy," who had crept into a corner to be within call, burst into a little laugh, whereupon the woman silenced him with a withering look.

"You've a letter for me?" she queried of "Tummas."

"No, ma'm, I hain't," replied the pretended yokel, laboriously producing the letter from among his inner vestments. "An' I never said I had nuther. It's for another feller."

"I'll read the top-writin', mum," cried "Jimmy." "He can't read, mum, but I kin. Give her to me, Tummas!"

He forthwith snatched the letter and slowly spelled out the superscription.

"Mr. Moresby can't be seen at present," said the woman. "You'll have to leave it for him."

"Not by a jugfull!" promptly responded "Tummas," recovering the letter and gripping it hard.

"You bet!" encouraged "Jimmy." "Hang on to it, Tummas, an' I'll stand by you."

The woman burst into a harsh laugh.

"How did you come by the letter, my friends?" she asked.

"Tummas" related the circumstances of receiving it, after his own way, whereat she seemed doubly interested.

"Ah!" she said; "and, in the event of Mr. Moresby not being on hand, you were to give the letter to Mrs. Griscom for him, eh?"

"Yes, ma'm."

"Well, I am Mrs. Griscom. So let me have the letter, if you please."

"Tummas" winked knowingly, and suggestively drew down one corner of his mouth, while Jimmy thrust both hands in his pockets, kicked his heels together, and assumed a highly diplomatic air.

"No, you don't, ma'm!" replied the former, wagging his head. "We're up to city snuff, we are. You don't come that game over us."

Mrs. Griscom laughed again, and a little more pleasantly.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Tummas" winked again.

"We was to git five dollars fur our trouble," he replied, in a hoarse whisper. "F-i-v-e d-o-l-l-a-r-s!"

"Them's the figgers!" reinforced "Jimmy." "Stick to 'em, Tummas. We won't be Jewed down a cent's worth if they have to bond and mortgage the buildin' fur to make the raise!"

Sammy here ventured upon a second mirthful expression, which was frowned into silence as summarily as the first.

The woman, after a moment's hesitation, began to fit a key into one of the drawers of a rude writing-table near which she was sitting.

"Very good," she said. "I'll take your word for such being the young lady's instructions."

She took out a cash-box and began turning over the numerous coins and bank-notes it contained.

"Jimmy" here gave his companion a cautionary kick, which was apparently harder than he intended.

"What are you barkin' my shin fur, you infernal little cuss!" roared "Tummas." "Be keeful, or I'll dress you down with a hickory saplin'!"

Sammy once more exploded, and this time escaped reproof, as the woman now looked up, scarcely less amused than he.

"He was kickin' me on the shank, ma'm!" wrathfully explained the elder rustic. "I'll stomp onto his stomach when I git him alone."

"You're a blamed fool, Tummas Cook!" exclaimed "Jimmy," with unmitigated disgust; "a tarnation ole jackass! You can't take a hint in company."

"What war you hintin' at, you one-boss little insect?"

"You two ought to try to get on more amicably," suggested the laundry forewoman, with a smile. "Here is your five dollars, my friend; now let me have the letter."

But here "Jimmy" once more snatched it out of his companion's hand, and put it in his pocket.

"Not much, mum!" he chirped. "Mebby Mr. Moresby himself 'll give more for it than you will."

"Tummas," apparently at last getting the intended "hint" through his understanding, drew a long breath and smiled approvingly.

"That's the sheep-wash!" he chuckled. "Jimmy, I fergive yer that mule-kick, an' I mayn't saphin' you, arter all. Your head 's leveler an' rounder than I thunk. Ah, ma'm!" regretfully; "what a hunky thing eddycation is—specially when yau hain't got it."

"He can't even read, mum," interposed "Jimmy," triumphantly. "But I kin."

"What is all this nonsense?" cried Mrs. Griscom, angrily. "Give me the letter, according to the young lady's instructions. Here is your promised fee, exorbitant as it is."

But "Tummas" had now become as implacable as the more sophisticated "Jimmy" himself.

Not much; it must be into Mr. Henry Moresby's hands alone, and none other's, that the precious letter should be placed. That was the ultimatum, and nothing the woman could say or urge sufficed to move the deep and knowing ones from their iron determination.

"See if you can find Moresby disengaged," the woman at last said, turning to the boy Sammy, with a peculiar look, that was lost upon neither of her visitors. "We shall have to satisfy these extraordinary persons somehow."

The boy vanished, and presently returned, accompanied by an individual, whose appearance considerably disappointed expectations.

"Here, Moresby," said Mrs. Griscom, with some words of explanation. "These persons have a letter for you from Chappaqua-ways, but you must pay for it. I sha'n't!"

The man addressed was a rough-looking young working-man, begrimed and oily from head to foot, and apparently fresh from an engine-room.

—the last sort of Mr. Moresby in the world that either the detective or his companion had expected to see.

He turned to them inquiringly.

"You've a letter for me?" he said, gruffly.

"Let me have it!"

CHAPTER VI.

A QUEER SORT OF LAUNDRY.

"He's got the dockymment," replied the pretended countryman, pointing to his little companion. "You're to apply fu'st to him, Mr. Moresby; fur, though I'm the messenger, he's got the eddycation. But, good Lord! how you do smell of engine-slush an' harness-grease! It's wuss nor a skunk under a hen-house!"

The young man gave him a savage look, and then turned impatiently to Cheese-it.

"Let's have it!" he demanded.

The boy jammed his hands yet deeper into his pockets, and shook his head vigorously, while bestowing upon the occupant an owlish wink.

"Ten dollars, or nothin'!" he chirped; "not a scrap nor syllable—not hair nor hide of it fur a cent less!"

"That's the talk, Jimmy!" roared Tummas, beamingly. "We know a good thing when we see it, if we are but hayseeds, we do!"

Young Moresby seemed puzzled, and turned to Mrs. Griscom, inquiringly, while Sammy seemed to be fairly going into fits in his special corner.

"They're an odd pair," replied the forewoman, smiling. "They evidently think that it's less of a bit of writing than a gold-mine they've got in custody."

And she explained the matter further.

"They must be blasted fools, even for hayseeds!" said the young man, angrily. "Five dollars for delivering a letter!"

"Ten, or nothin'!" reiterated Cheese-it, stoutly;—"not a glimpse, not a syllable, not a smell!"

"Haw! haw! the deuce you say!"

And the unsavory young man forthwith grabbed the little fellow, turned him up, and began to go for his pockets.

But at this juncture the elder was on his feet with a demonstrative stamp and flourish.

"Hands off!" he bawled, jamming his hat down over his forehead. "No violence to my side-partner—he's a larnt boy an' a scollard, he is! Hands off, or I'm on to you like a bobtailed bull inter a cabbage-patch!"

And with that he seized the belligerent like a whirlwind, his coat-tails flying, his legs waving about like the sails of a windmill.

In spite of Mrs. Griscom's expostulations and sundry fresh explosions on the part of Sammy, for several seconds there was a sort of concentrated riot, for the engine-room delegate, though overmatched, was no less determined and bellicose than his opponents.

But the disguised detective purposely steered the struggle in the direction of a certain mysterious-looking door opposite the one communicating with the work-room, and which had somehow excited his curiosity from the outset.

Through it the struggling and scrambling trio crashed at last, the pretended Tummas fairly on top of the laundry representative, Jimmy executing a hornpipe of sated triumph, and Mrs. Griscom and Sammy in a state of high excitement on the threshold.

The interior thus rudely disclosed was in odd keeping with its dingy and business-like connections, to say the least.

A narrow but sumptuously-furnished hall and stairway, having, so far as could be seen at the hasty glance necessitated by the circumstances of the intrusion, no visible communication with the adjoining street; and yet suggesting a connection with yet more luxuriously-appointed rooms above.

All this was taken in by the disguised pair at a single comprehensive glimpse, and without apparent cessation in the difficulty under way.

"There you be, consarn your greasy pictur!" exclaimed the victor, glowering upon his prostrate foe, while keeping him pinned to the carpet. "What dy've think of a hayseed fur a fu'st-class cyclone now?"

"Let me up!" growled the fallen man, with an oath.

"Easy, there, easy, Mr. Harness-Grease! I'll see about that! And, meantime, let me counsel yer as a Dutch uncle not to be perfane."

"Ten, or nothin'!" chirped Cheese-it, enthusiastically. "Them's the figgers, pap; an' we'll stick to 'em!"

"Dunno 'bout that," demurred the detective. "Prehaps we'd better fetch the perlice into this cowed yard, arter all, an' tell 'em the hull story—ha'nted house, mysterious gal, way she guv us the letter, and all! Oh, if I was only a larnt feller like you, Jimmy!"

An alarmed exclamation from the forewoman caused him to look up.

She was very pale, and the girls and the Chinamen from the work-room were beginning to crowd into the office with woudering faces.

"Here!" she exclaimed, thrusting out some money with a trembling hand. "Here is a ten-dollar-note. For God's sake, give up the letter, and take yourselves off!"

A change had also come over the young engineer, who, on being permitted, silently and doggedly got upon his feet without further demonstration.

"Thank 'ee, ma'm" and the pretended countryman accepted the proffered fee with an elephantine scrape of the foot. "The honor of old Westchester county is satisfied, ma'm. Jimmy, surrender the dockymment. College-bred ez you be, you also orter feel satisfied."

"Jimmy" obeyed, with a victorious side-grin for Sammy's special delectation.

The young man snatched the letter, glanced at the superscription, thrust it into his trousers-pocket, and incontinently disappeared.

"Wait a minute, you two," said the forewoman, as they were about to follow his example. "I want a parting word with you."

They were once more in the little office, which she had forthwith cleared of intruders, Sammy included, after refastening the bursted door.

"You are perhaps looking for employment here in the city?" she queried.

"Yes, ma'm," cheerily replied "Tummas" for the pair, with a business-like shuffle of his big shoes. "An' mebbe we ain't so green as we look, ma'm, fur all that our eddycation is summat one-sided. Eh, Jimmy?"

"That's the talk, pap!" responded the precocious youth, helping himself to an enormous chew of tobacco. "You see, ma'm, Tummas can't read—don't even know his letters—but I kin."

"Would you like to try your hand at our laundry business?"

"Oh, anything, ma'm!" continued "Tummas," genially. "Light work an' big wages—that's the only thing we're pertick'lar about."

"Indeed! Well, if you come here to-morrow or next day, I shall see what can be done about setting you to work, both of you."

Both man and boy expressed themselves highly pleased at the prospect.

"In the mean time," continued the woman, hesitatingly, "I shall expect the most perfect reticence as to anything that may have struck you as queer, or out of the common run, hereabouts;—as to that passage and stairway in yonder, together with everything connected with your obtaining and bringing that letter. You understand?"

Yes; they expressed themselves seemingly to her satisfaction, and the boy Sammy was again summoned to show them out of the building by the way they had entered it.

The boy followed them out into the street, carefully closing the large entrance-door behind him.

"Say?" he whispered, mysteriously.

"What is it, sonny?" demanded the detective.

"Yes, speak out, Sammy, even if you ain't learnt," said Cheese-it, benignantly. "I'll put-tect you."

Sammy grinned from ear to ear.

"You know that feller you gave the letter to?" he said, quickly recovering his gravity.

"The harness-greaser what I shook the sawdust out of?" replied "Tummas," blandly. "Sart'in, my son, sart'in!"

"Well, your letter was for Mr. Henry Moresby, wasn't it?"

"Sure pop!"

"Well, he wasn't Mr. Henry Moresby at all!"

"No? Look here, this begins to look serious. Cheatin' an' robbin' the mail is a tough crimination, Sammy!"

"You ain't a mail, though."

"Wal, of any cuss calls me a she-male, he'd better look out fur white squalls in seed-time, that's all. If he wasn't Moresby, who was he?"

"He was Moresby, but he wasn't Mr. Henry Moresby."

"Oho! big fambly mebbe, eh?"

"He's Dick Moresby, supposed to be a younger brother, what runs our laundry engine."

"And who is Mr. Henry Moresby?"

"Nobody knows."

"Hey?"

"True as you live. Letters come for him, an' all that sort of thing, but nobody about the chebang ever saw him yet, unless it might have been old gal Griscom. Don't give me away in this, you fellers!"

And, with that, Sammy darted back into the work-room.

"Boss?" said Cheese-it, as the pair hurried off for the quarter in which Old Grip made his residence.

"Well, my boy?"

"Doesn't it strike you that there's smetthing all-fired queer about that steam laundry, as steam-laundries generally go?"

"Humph!" was the non-committal reply.

"There are several queer things to turn over in our minds in bed to-night, Cheese-it."

CHAPTER VII.

THE BANK PRESIDENT.

OLD GRIP occupied a very comfortable flat, in an agreeable part of the city, with Luella, his beautiful and amiable spouse, and Cheese-it had by this time long been one of their household.

On the morning following the veteran detective's varying adventures, as related in the foregoing chapters, Luella, to whom he had made everything known on the previous night, said to him as he was finishing his toilet:

"So you are no longer so confident as formerly, my dear, as to the participation of Claude Markham in the great Occidental National Bank robbery?"

"I was never wholly confident of it, you must remember, Luella," was the reply, "save as feeling sure that his arrest might lead to clearing up the mystery in one way or another."

"Ah! but the conduct of Maud Markham in that Westchester mountain nook was scarcely such as you might expect of a criminal's wife conscious of her husband's guilt?"

"Quite the contrary."

"What inferences do you draw from your observations thereabouts?"

"That the young man has been more or less entangled in the affair."

"Why shouldn't he give himself up, if morally innocent?"

"I repeated to you the wife's explanation to her lunatic of a brother, the Wild Shoemaker of Whippoorwill, on that point."

"Ah! Claude's knowledge of the bank president's remorseless personal animosity?"

"Yes."

"But what is your own impression?"

"That there may be something in hers."

"Non-committal as usual, even with me!" with her pleasant laugh. "Of course you wouldn't value my impressions on the subject?"

"You must know just to the contrary, my dear."

"Shall I state them?"

"And welcome!"

"Well, my first impression is, that Maud Markham is a truly devoted wife and very much of a heroine."

"Agreed, to the letter!"

"Next, that Claude Markham may know something about this robbery, but is absolutely innocent of participation therein."

"That remains to be proved."

"Next, that the real criminal is this mysterious Mr. Henry Moresby, who is, in some way, using the Markhams' confidence in his probity as a mask for his own security."

"Agreed, at least in part."

"Next, that this Mrs. Griscom is the fellow's confederate, and her entire steam laundry business little more nor less than a blind for his security while engaged in criminal practices, perhaps upon a gigantic scale."

"That isn't so bad."

"Next, that the concealed sumptuousness which you had a glimpse of in connection with the laundry likewise suggests this mysterious Mr. Henry Moresby as a man of pronounced luxurious tastes and inclinations."

"Why, you're doing real well!"

"Next, that he may eventually prove identical with some notorious criminal of world-wide range and phenomenal cleverness, whose presence in this country is not even so much as suspected."

"Better and better!"

"Next, that the secret of Mr. Bank President Goldkirk's animosity against the Markhams is in some way connected with those missing private letters whose recovery he seems even more anxious about than with regard to the stolen bank property itself."

"Good for you!"

"Moreover, that those letters might be made to prove, unpleasantly and unfortunately for him, Mr. Goldkirk's continuous and cald fish wooing of Maud Crust (since then Mrs. Maud Markham) when she was his daughter's governess. A millionaire's persistent suit, which would not take no for an answer, but as persistently declined by a young person who was perhaps little more than an upper domestic in his household! Why, it is said to have made him ridiculous in his circle!"

"Men don't like to be made ridiculous; it is the unforgivable offense with some."

"But he had only his own infatuation to blame."

"Still, Goldkirk is a steadfast churchman, a Sunday-school superintendent and all that."

Luella's blue eyes flashed. "And," she went on, indignantly, "a convivialist on the sly, together with his companion Bacchanalians of that Daffodil Coterie of his, as was ventilated in that Western newspaper's New York correspondence that made such a sensation not long ago!"

"A brief one, summarily squelched, and for which the newspaper was mulcted in heavy damages in the civil suit that followed!"

"Still, it showed up the man as a hypocrite, and I don't wonder that the governess refused to become his second wife, for all his money."

"I do. However, any more impressions, my dear?"

"Oh, any number! Next, for instance, that the very fact of Claude Markham having made no attempt to use those letters against his avowed enemy, Goldkirk, is proof positive of their not being in his possession, ergo, that he could not have been concerned in the bank robbery."

bery, which undoubtedly included the missing correspondence in its cash and bonds sweep!"

Old Grip, who had by this time, finished his toilet, burst into a laugh and kissed his wife, always an affectionate way of his.

"What an analyzer you are!" he exclaimed. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue would have been a mere bagatelle in your hands, my dear Luella, while the Mary Rogers Mystery itself could have scarcely maintained itself for a day with you at the detective helm. But, no more impressions at present, not till after breakfast, at all events, for I am just ravenous. Come along!"

"Wait, sir! Not a step, even if you starve, before you tell me of your next move in this affair!"

"Good! My personal report to Mr. Bank President Goldkirk."

"Right after breakfast?"

"Yes; before he shall have quitted his residence for down-town."

"That will do. Now you may have something to eat."

Cheese-it, who occupied a snug little hall room in the Crimmins domestic economy, put in a smiling appearance for breakfast, and with an appetite by no means second to his illustrious principal's on this occasion.

"Oh, Lordy, boss!" he exclaimed, passing up his plate a third time for toasted muffin and sausage; "but doesn't it take a milk-farm experience in Westchester county to make one appreciate city home comforts? Thankee, ma'm; just one more cup of coffee, since you'd feel hurt if I didn't beg for it; and not quite so sweet, if you please."

Both the detective and Luella laughed, but the Westchester milk-farm experience had already been exhausted as a subject for mirthful reminiscence, and Old Grip was soon in readiness for his visit to the banker.

"Cheese-it," said he, "you had better look in on Mistress Forewoman Griscom for what you can pick up in the course of the morning, which will necessitate the resumption of your rustic character. See if you can't have something fresh for me against my return at lunch time, or later on."

Kissing his wife good-by, the great detective hurried away.

Mr. Clifford Goldkirk, long since a widower, and a gentleman of fair social standing and a most substantial worldly basis, had his palatial residence in the ultra-fashionable neighborhood of Fifth avenue and Central Park.

When the detective sent in his card, the banker was still at breakfast with his only child, Blanche, a pretty and sentimental girl of nineteen, fair and petite, the sole mistress of the establishment, with its glittering appointments and large retinue of servants; though there was a nominal housekeeper in Mrs. Beckwith, a stately nonentity or figurehead of uncertain age, who was more or less omnipresent as a sort of *chaperon* for the spoiled daughter of luxury, notwithstanding that the latter was possessed of a decided will of her own which she was seldom backward in exercising.

"Mr. Crimmins, eh?" commented Mr. Goldkirk, with a slight frown, the detective's card in his hand, his coffee at his elbow. "Our worthy detective, Old Grip, eh? Humph!"

"Oh, papa!" cried Miss Goldkirk, impulsively, "have him in here at once. Perhaps he would like a glass of Sauterne or something stronger. I dote on detectives!"

A detective in a millionaire's breakfast-room! Good Mrs. Beckwith, from her position behind the coffee-urn, rolled up her eyes in speechless horror at the very idea.

But Papa Goldkirk, who was accustomed to indulge Blanche unquestioningly in everything, made a sign to the servant, and the detective was forthwith admitted.

The latter, altogether undazzled by the splendor of his surroundings, calmly seated himself, after a polite recognition of the feminine presences, and a yet politer refusal of the proffered refreshment.

"I am ready with my report, sir," said he, when you are ready to receive it. Or would you prefer to see me down at the bank later on?"

"Not at the bank!" hastily replied Mr. Goldkirk. "I shall be at your disposal presently, Crimmins."

CHAPTER VIII.

A MAN OF THE WORLD.

MISS GOLDKIRK had met the dark-eyed detective several times before, and had already come to the conclusion, somewhere in her rather shallow but sentimental nature, that he was very "nice," indeed, and might be worth cultivating under different social considerations.

She therefore honored him with more than one interested glance from her dreamy, China-blue eyes, while her father was finishing his coffee, and presently said:

"Your vocation must be just enchanting, Mr. Crimmins! Oh, if I were but a man, how dearly I would love to be a detective!"

"You might not like it so well as you imagine, Miss Goldkirk," Crimmins replied, with his agreeable smile.

"Oh, I know I should! I'm romantic to the core, you should know."

"Haven't a doubt of it, I am sure, miss. But then, all is not romance in a detective's life."

"No? Oh, I am sure you underestimate it. Now, how could you have earned your surname of Old Grip, I wonder?"

"A long story, Miss Goldkirk."

"Of course, it must be. Won't you tell it to me some time? Old Grip! how romantic! how individual! I've no doubt I should hang entranced upon the tale, as did Desdemona on her Othello's, with its hair-breadth 'scapes, and all that sort of thing. Sha'n't Mr. Crimmins tell it to me some time, papa?" With as much confidence as if asking for a ticket to the opera or a new piece *bijouterie*.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the banker, laughing, finishing his cup and lighting a cigar. "As if Mr. Crimmins had time or inclination for a fashionable young lady's amusement! Besides, what would the count say to your enacting Desdemona to Old Grip's Moor of Venice? Have you thought of that, little one?"

"Peste!" with a pout; "as if I should think of it, at all! Besides," with a smile, "Count Montalbert is even more docile than the rest of them, I assure you, papa. And a pretty good thing for him it is so, or he would get his dismissal in short order."

Mr. Goldkirk shrugged his shoulders, as if not wholly pleased with the turn he had given the conversation, and then he summarily arose.

"Have a cigar, Crimmins," he said. "Then we will adjourn to the library."

Once in the library with the detective the banker's free-and-easy air instantly gave way to an eager, earnest and energetic manner.

He was a somewhat corpulent, decidedly handsome man of sixty or thereabouts, faultlessly attired, but with a certain something about him that was not favorable to trustfulness, but rather the reverse.

"Now, Crimmins!" and he threw himself into an easy-chair, with his legs crossed, his brows knitted, and his whole demeanor expressive of suppressed eagerness. "Let me see, you have been gone nearly a week?"

"Just about, sir."

"Spying around Westchester county all that time, as you had intended?"

"Yes."

"Well, what have you to report? Surely you must have run that rascally ingrate to earth by this time?"

"You refer to Mr. Claude Markham, I suppose, sir?"

"Of course!" with a surprised look. "Who else, in the name of goodness?"

"Ah! Well, Mr. Goldkirk, I hardly know whether my report will be satisfactory to you or not."

"And why don't you know, pray?"

"I have found out the man's hiding-place," was the blunt reply. "And I no longer think it possible that he is guilty."

Mr. Goldkirk, who seemed somewhat startled at first, repressed an angry rejoinder with difficulty.

"I thought," he said, after a pause, "I had thoroughly convinced you of Markham's guilt—of his motives for committing the robbery."

"No; you only made me think him possibly guilty."

"Well, well! I shall attend to that when the scoundrel's arrest is secured. His hiding-place?"

"Mr. Claude Markham's, you mean?"

"Of course I do," angrily. "Curse it all, man! why do you venture to discriminate and split hairs thus with me?"

The detective, whose personal liking for the banker was by no means excessive, eyed him coldly.

"It is my habit to sift and discriminate, sir," he said. "And why not with you as much as with any one else?"

Mr. Goldkirk flushed.

"Because—because," he hesitated, with a look of hauteur, "of the difference in our social positions, sir."

"That for your social position, sir!" was the contemptuous reply, with a snap of the finger and thumb. "Vapor, if you must, upon something that has a real existence. Good-day!"

But, as he rose to go, Mr. Goldkirk, though still flushing resentfully even to the top of his partially bald head, sprung up and laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"Oh, pshaw!" he exclaimed, with a forced laugh; "sit down, Crimmins. Why should we wrangle like children?"

But, Old Grip, for reasons of his own, resolved to have the matter out then and there.

"Hark you, Mr. Bank President Goldkirk!" said he, calmly; "have you ever remarked me to be particularly dazzled or overcome by your sumptuousness hereabouts and elsewhere—the appurtenances of the social position you seem disposed to vaunt, and which any other man's money can buy, for that matter, if he only have enough of it to waste upon similar vanities?"

"No, no; of course not," deprecatingly. "Nor have I meant that you should be dazzled or overcome."

"Then don't attempt the 'social difference' dodge with me again, if you please!"

"Oh, pshaw!"

"It might lead, you see, to certain retorts and reflections on my part as to character-differences that would not be wholly agreeable to you, sir."

"Come, come; this is nonsense!"

"By no means; merely the pitting of genuine honesty of character against whatever hypocrisy may underlie a sleek, well-fed exterior of worldly prosperity."

"Oh!"

"You, sir, have character-blemishes you may well wish to conceal. I have none."

A furious look leaped into the banker's face, indicative of natural violence seldom permitted to express themselves; and then, by a powerful effort, he was his smooth, bland, worldly self again—the Mr. Hyde again lost in the Dr. Jekyll, as one might say.

"Oh, pshaw!" with his careless *bonhomie* laugh; "we sha'n't quarrel—at least I sha'n't, if you will. Do sit down, my friend, and let this foolish passage between us be forgotten."

"Why not?" with a smile upon his own part, and the detective, having accomplished what he wanted in that particular line, resumed his seat.

"Claude Markham," he continued, as if no asperity had intervened, "has buried himself in a picturesque retreat of some sort somewhere in the rock-wilderness of Westchester county between the villages of Chappaqua, Pleasantville and Armonk."

"Humph! this is business-like. Then you don't exactly know where his hiding-place is?"

"I could probably lay my hand upon the gentleman on short notice," was the evasive reply.

"He, he, he! Gentleman is good!"

"Very good, and not inappropriate."

"Well, well; then you have not seen or had communication with him?"

"Only with his wife, thus far."

"Ha!" with a passing frown, quickly succeeded by a resentful glint of the eye not agreeable to behold. "Then you have communicated with a very handsome woman, my friend—a very handsome woman!"

"A devoted wife and refined lady, sir, to the best of my judgment."

"Ah?" with a dismissive gesture. "Well, well; of course you didn't communicate with the girl in your detective's character?"

"In disguise."

"Of course, of course! Well, you have located the fugitive?"

"Yes."

"Better procure a warrant, then, and arrest him forthwith."

"But why arrest him at all, if there is no proof of his guilt?"

"Look here, Crimmins, I'll attend to the proofs later on. What I first want is to have the man jugged—imprisoned, and in short order."

"Then you'll have to get some one else to arrest him; I sha'n't—not till I'm better assured of his guilt than now, at all events."

The banker looked at him narrowly.

"I was under the impression," he said, slowly, "that I had engaged your services, sir, and pretty much at your own valuation."

"Correct."

"Then what difference can it make to you?"

"Every difference in the world. I refuse point-blank to hound a man down without reasonable suspicion as to his criminality."

"You are, professionally, a detective?"

"And, privately, a man of honor."

"So! Look here; I want that man arrested forthwith and thrown into prison. Will you perform the job?"

"I will not!"

CHAPTER IX.

DETECTIVE AND BANKER.

THE banker gave a forced laugh.

"You are sufficiently blunt, Mr. Crimmins!" he observed, with a sneer.

"I would that you were equally blunt, Mr. Goldkirk," was the composed reply.

"Oh, pshaw! I am more so than you think. But, above all, I am a man of the world, and you are a man of the world. Let us confer together on that basis."

"Agreed."

"Now look here, then, Crimmins; I might retort that it is simply your business to follow my instructions unquestioningly."

"Humph!"

"Why don't you believe Claude Markham guilty of our bank's robbery, Crimmins?"

"Well, that robbery included a private correspondence of yours, I have been given to understand?"

"Y-e-e-s!"

"Letters which you are very anxious to recover?"

"Well, rather!"

"There you are, then. It is simply impossible that those letters, together with the stolen funds, can be in Mr. Claude Markham's possession."

"Why impossible?"

"Because," slowly, "otherwise he would have long before this brought you to your marrow-bones by merely proclaiming the fact of possessing them."

The banker started as if he had received a blow in the face, and yet he managed to retain his self-control.

"Heavens, man!" he exclaimed, hoarsely; "what can you mean!"

"You best know the contents of those missing letters, Mr. Goldkirk."

"Of course I do; and you best don't know, for that matter."

"True; but it is permissible to conjecture."

The banker rose, and, thrusting his hands in his pockets, agitatedly paced the floor, while now and then covertly regarding his companion with curious looks.

"A little wine wouldn't be out of the way," he muttered, at last, and touched a bell.

"None for me, if you please," interposed the detective, blandly. "It isn't the middle of the forenoon yet."

But Mr. Goldkirk had already resumed his seat, with his demeanor outwardly restored.

He nodded smilingly.

"Bring some Tokay and the brandy," he said, when a gorgeously-liveried footman had put in an obsequious appearance. "Fresh cigars, too, by the way."

"Now, look you, Crimmins," continued the banker, when the servant had disappeared, "may it not be that you lay a little too much stress on those missing letters?"

He leaned back, his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat, a bland smile upon his chubby face.

"Do I lay more stress on them than you do?"

"Well, now, that depends. But stay; you think that Markham could not have been the thief?"

"That is my impression."

"Who else but he would have had any motive in taking them at all? For the ordinary burglar the letters would scarcely have been considered along with the 'swag,' you must acknowledge."

"True; but there are some very extraordinary burglars nowadays."

"Humph!"

The bank president knitted his brows, but when the wine and cigars had been brought in and the pair were once more alone, his face cleared again.

"Now, my dear Crimmins," he continued, with renewed geniality, smacking his lips over a mixed glass of the Tokay and brandy, which the detective had persisted in declining, "you owe me a little explanation. Come, now," laughing pleasantly, "acknowledge that you do, old fellow!"

"If I owe it, I ought to pay it, Mr. Goldkirk," was the smiling rejoinder. "Pray explain the explanation that is due, if you please."

"Pretty good! pretty good! I'll be outspoken, my friend. What do you conjecture or imagine of the contents of those stolen letters of mine that could place me in the power of any man having them in his surreptitious possession? Come, now!"

"I'll only answer that question on your insistence, sir."

"Well, I do insist."

"Well, my general inference with regard to the letters is based upon a discontent with the state of widowhood, and your reputation for—er—gallantry, as one might say."

Goldkirk flushed.

"Humph!" he ejaculated. "I suppose you refer to that newspaper calumny, for which I made that Western editor sweat out the last ten years' earnings of his libelous sheet?"

"I do refer to that, sir."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the banker, apparently with genuine earnestness; "it is too bad, Crimmins. Look you! what if I am disposed to relaxation in a genial way, now and then? Was that any reason why that scoundrelly correspondent should have dragged my other private affairs into public discussion?"

"By no means, provided they were honorable."

"They were honorable, Crimmins. I swear it! Fool I may have made of myself in my long and hopeless siege of Miss Crust's heart—I don't deny that I was—but my motives were of the purest. The girl's beauty and sweetness of character simply haunted me beyond reason. I would so gladly, so gratefully have made her my wife, with all the advantages of my wealth and position at her feet! And then to be scorned, persistently, contemptuously, and all for my private secretary—a fellow without a hundred dollars in the world!"

The detective could not help being amused.

"Youth and good looks go a long way with some young women—further than even money," he suggested.

"I should say so! As if I hadn't found it out to my cost! But look here! This is the case: I made long and honorable—over-persistent, perhaps, but none the less honorable—court to my daughter's governess, who simply, in addition to refusing my suit, married my secretary. Was there anything particularly unmanly in this?"

"None whatever."

"And was it fair in that newspaper chap to

air the thing in print, in addition to my Daffodil Coterie follies, for which I did not so much care?"

"No; it was indefensible."

"What was there, then, in my conduct toward the young lady that could have tempted the rascally quill-driver to such infernal liberties with my inner life?"

"Its element of the ridiculous."

The banker gnashed his teeth.

"That is it!" he exclaimed. "By Jupiter! Sooner than be ridiculous, Crimmins, I would welcome death—I'd almost as lief be poor."

"But, the young lady did not make you ridiculous."

"Her beauty—my love for her—did!"

"Bless me! you would punish her and the man of her heart for your own misfortune?"

Mr. Goldkirk covered his face with his hands, and when he removed them he was outwardly calm.

"Look here," he said, "I want those letters, and I am satisfied they are in the possession of the Markhams."

"Suppose they are; what is there in those letters that you need fear so much, Mr. Goldkirk?"

"Well," irritably, "they make me out to have been even more ridiculous than that newspaper ghoul did."

"Is that all?" significantly.

The banker started.

"Good Lord!" he said, collecting himself afresh; "isn't that enough?"

"No. You are not insane; and no sane man would keep up such a cruel, remorseless persecution of an unoffending couple, as you are doing, merely to recover a pack of ill-advised but harmless protestations of a hopeless attachment as embodied in mere love-letters."

Mr. Goldkirk found himself in a dilemma, from which he sought to extricate himself by flying into yet another passion.

"You are evidently bent on insulting me!" he cried.

"I deny it!" was the cool reply. "Nothing has been said by me that was not directly evoked by yourself."

"Shall you arrest Claude Markham on the charge of robbing the Occidental National Bank, in accordance with my repeatedly expressed instructions, or shall you not?"

"Decidedly not!"

"Go! Your services are no longer required in the Occidental Bank robbery case. I dispense with them forthwith."

"Perhaps you would, if you could," and the detective calmly arose.

"And why can I not dispense with them, sir?"

"Oh," with a shrug, "don't worry, I beg of you. Your board of directors and fellow-stockholders will doubtless decide that! It will be seen whether they are most interested in the arrest of the real criminal and the recovery of their property, or in subordinating all that to the gratification of a private spite on the part of their president. Good-morning, sir!"

"Wait!" Goldkirk was after him almost with a bound. "We mustn't part this way, Crimmins. Forget the hasty words that passed my lips!"

"Oh, just as you please!"

"But you are in earnest! Understand that I retract those words indubitably. You will regard them as unspoken?"

"Yes, if you regret them."

"Thank you, Crimmins, thank you! Suppose you confer with me again, and soon—say this evening, or to-morrow evening at nine, just as you choose."

"Very well, Mr. Goldkirk."

"But not at the bank; nor even here again," hastily. "Let me see." He smiled ingratiatingly, and lowered his voice. "Perhaps you have guessed that there are furnished rooms at the top of our bank building? Ah, to be sure. Well, I have a private den there—a retreat from the care-infested world, you understand. So, almost any evening between nine and twelve. The janitor's bell—a word in his ear will do. Good-morning, and God have you in His keeping, my friend!"

As the detective was quitting the library, there was being admitted at the street entrance a tall, distinguished-looking individual.

Mr. Goldkirk appeared somewhat taken aback, but at once pressed forward to address the new-comer as "my dear count," while, at the same moment, as the gorgeous officiating flunky stepped obsequiously back, a drawing-room door opened, with sentimental and romantic Miss Goldkirk smiling a careless greeting as the "count" made haste to press his lips to her extended hand with an old-time courtliness.

"An adventurer of the played-out, conventional species!" was the detective's silent comment, as he made his escape from the house unobserved. "Where and when have I met him before? But the question is, Is the scoundrelly banker's shallow daughter worth saving from the fellow's toils? That remains to be seen. Hallo! Moresby, Moresby! Why should that name occur to me so suddenly in this connection?"

CHAPTER X.

CHEESE-IT'S REPORT.

LUELLA was duly acquainted at lunch-time with the result of her husband's interview with the banker, so far as it could be said to have had any definite result.

"It is just as I surmised with regard to that man's weak and despicable character," she said. "What is your main course now in the matter, Edward?"

"To locate and identify this mysterious chap, Moresby," was the prompt response. "And I strongly suspect that, in addition to being the bank-robber, he is identical with this adventurer Montalbert!"

"And, as a side issue, then, you will devote yourself to rescuing foolish Miss Blanche from his fortune-hunting designs?"

"I suppose so, if the girl is worth the effort."

"I am surprised at you, Edward Crimmins! As if any endangered girl, however foolish or selfish, were not worth a saving effort! You suppose so, indeed!"

"Don't be too hard on me, my dear. Can't you understand that the bringing of the chap to book for the robbery—supposing the truth of my hypothesis in the premises—would of necessity upset his fortune-hunting plans with regard to the young thing who would so like to be a Desdemona to my Moor of Venice?"

"Ah! but he might succeed with her before such a revelation could be made!"

"We must take our chances as to that. But, leave it to me. I am not customarily indifferent to Innocence in the tiger's grip, as you must know."

"Of course, and who better than I?" with a gentle look. "Then, as another and chief side-issue—"

"This disentanglement of the Markhams, as a matter of course."

"Yes, yes; that is it. And, maybe, I might help you out there?"

"Why not? We shall see."

"I have a notion," continued Mrs. Crimmins, thoughtfully, "that, from what I have heard of her, I should like to know and love that woman."

Here Cheese-it made his appearance, both hopeful and hungry.

"What have you got to report?" demanded Grip, when the little fellow had seated himself and made some progress with his repast.

"Boss, everything is just hunky!" was the characteristic response. "Yes, Mrs. Crimmins, another glass of beer is what I sha'n't object to, and you can even depend on me to run down for a fresh supply when the pitcher is empty."

"I've no doubt of it," said Luella, smiling.

"You are seldom backward about coming forward in such an event, Cheese-it."

"You've been about the Etna Laundry all the morning?" asked the detective, a little impatiently.

"All the morning, boss," cheerily. "And, I've just time for a few mouthfuls before hurrying back to my work."

"Your work?"

"It's a go, boss!"

"Explain yourself, my boy."

"I'm regularly engaged as Dick Moresby's assistant in the engine-room, besides miscellaneous."

"That isn't bad for a beginning."

"Ha!" with his mouth full; "they may find it the worse for an ending."

"Go on with your story."

"Old Griscom hired me on sight—four dollars a week, and my washing! Don't your mouth water over it, boss? But you're out. 'Tummas' is already getting rich as a horse-car stableman's helper, as I informed the old gal, so that his application won't be looked for."

Old Grip nodded his approval, while Luella laughed outright.

"So I am regularly installed, boss. Have already made fair-to-middlin' friends with the young engineer, our antagonist of last evening, besides improving Sammy's acquaintance, giving fairish satisfaction to the forewoman, licking one of the Chinamen, and mashing half the gals in the ironing-room."

"Not so very bad for a starter, eh, boss? At all events, I feel real encouraged in my new industry, and may even be promoted to bossing the mangles if I apply myself real close."

"You've done well and rapidly. What about Moresby?"

"Nothing as yet," with a shake of the head, while mastering a fresh piece of pie.

"Didn't the boy Sammy exaggerate with regard to the man's mystery?"

"Not a bit."

"He is merely a name there, then, and nothing more substantial?"

"That's about the size of it, boss. Excepting Mrs. Griscom and Dick Moresby, the man's younger brother, I don't believe any one about the place has ever set eyes on him—that is, to know who he was."

"Perhaps he is a myth?"

"I've thought of that. But then, would the young lady back up yonder in Whippoorwill have written a letter to a myth?"

"Perhaps so, as a blind."

"That is true."
 "However, didn't any noticeable person show up at the laundry?"
 "Yes, and that was after Mrs. Griscom had gone away. It seems she has an eccentric habit of disappearing at odd times, leaving one of the most trusted of the ironers, a Lucy Jarvis, in her place."
 "Oho! that is worth considering in itself."
 "Yes, a sort of sub-mystery, you might call it. But I'll get at the bottom of that one, sooner or later."
 "You speak confidently."
 "And feel confident, boss."
 "Why?"
 "Lucy Jarvis is my particular mash."
 "Oh!" and Luella laughed again.
 "Who was the noticeable person you spoke of as appearing there?"
 "A tall, fine-looking swell, dressed to kill. He seemed to be put out at not finding Mrs. Griscom, for whom he inquired."
 "Another mystery?"
 "Not altogether. They all know a little about him. He has called many times, yet, strange to say, always to inquire for Mrs. Griscom, the forewoman, and just as invariably to find her 'nix coom arouse!"
 "That is strange, as you say."
 "There's stranger yet."
 "What is it?"
 "You remember that palatial hall and stairway we stumbled in upon so unexpectedly?"
 "I should say so."
 "Well this swell has a key to the communicating door, and always makes his way to the street from the office by that means, or goes up that flight of stairs, no one seems to know exactly which."
 "But there was no street-connection with the rich little hallway, I remarked."
 "The connection is a roundabout one—out back through an area."
 "Aha! and the name of this mysterious swell?"
 "He's a count."
 "A count?"
 "The Count Montalbert. That is all I could learn about him."
 Luella clapped her hands together, and exchanged a gratified glance with Old Grip.
 "It's the beginning of the end!" exclaimed the latter. "This Count Montalbert and Henry Moresby, Maud Markham's mysterious correspondent, are unquestionably one and the same!"
 "Hullo!" cried Cheese-it; "you really think so, boss?"
 "Not a doubt of it."
 And the detective briefly sketched, for his little assistant's benefit, the outcome of his interview with the banker.
 "By Jupiter!" said the boy, "this is getting so knotty and interesting that I'll make that steam laundry hot but what I'll find out something more worth knowing before night. *Au rivers*, as the frog-eaters say."
 And he disappeared.
 "Cheese-it is growing more and more useful to you every day," observed Luella, a little later on, in their snug drawing-room, where her husband had lighted his cigar. "What shall be your next immediate step?" she added, when he had puffed away thoughtfully without answering.
 "Can't say exactly. We had better keep quiet for a few days, while following up this Moresby affair, though Goldkirk will have to be seen again in the interim—perhaps to-morrow night."
 "And the Markhams?"
 "Well, I might also run up again to Whippoorwill and make friends there, sooner or later."
 "Taking me with you?" eagerly.
 "That depends. You see, if we could see our way a little more clearly with regard to this Moresby-Montalbert fellow, all might be pretty plain sailing."
 Here there was a ring at the apartment-bell, and presently Nelly, their neat housemaid, appeared.
 "The gentleman is in the passage, sir," she said, presenting a card, "and he says he would like very much to see you."
 The detective glanced at the card with an astonished look, and then handed it to his wife without a word.
 It bore an elaborate crest, and under that the pretentious name:
 "MONSIEUR LE COMTE HENRI MONTALBERT."

CHAPTER XI.

A MOMENTOUS INTERVIEW.

"WONDERS will never cease!" commented Luella, raising her eyes in blank astonishment from the perusal of the card. "Talk of an angel, and you hear the rustle of his wings."
 Crimmins merely nodded, and pointed to an adjoining room in which she could overhear what should pass if she chose, and then, as his wife noiselessly disappeared, he signed the maid to show the visitor in.
 "Count Henri Montalbert" was a middle-aged, dark-featured man, with singularly piercing

black eyes, tall, graceful, elegantly dressed, and with a combined suggestion of gentlemanly composure, powerful intelligence, and, possibly, a vast amount of reserved energy and strength.
 "Sir," said he, after accepting a proffered chair, with the exchange of a few common-places, "if I err not, I have the honor of addressing Mr. Edward Crimmins, otherwise Old Grip, the world-famous American detective?"
 He spoke with a very slight foreign accent, which might have been assumed.

"I am Edward Crimmins, sir, sometimes called Old Grip," was the detective's blunt reply.

"Allow me to ask you if you remember to have seen me before?"

"Yes; this morning in the hallway of Mr. Banker Goldkirk's house, as I was on the point of quitting it."

"I mean prior to that."

"I cannot say. Your face is vaguely familiar to me, but I cannot at present place it."

The visitor smiled.

"I may be able to assist your memory on that point," he said, easily. "But first, allow me to ask if you were not considerably surprised at receiving my card?"

"Very considerably, sir; I freely acknowledge it."

"Thanks for your frankness, which I intend to imitate, and in a manner which I dare say will complete your astonishment."

"*Eh bien, Monsieur le Comte*, I am awaiting your coup."

The count burst into a genuinely-amused laugh.

"Let me begin at the beginning, then—by declaring my identity," he replied, gayly. "I, my dear Crimmins, am Jud Jelliffe, English burglar, confidence-man, adventurer and rogue—at-large, alias Count Montalbert, alias Henry Moresby, and too many other fictions for enumeration. Aha! confess that I did not overestimate the surprise I promised you."

In spite of his iron self-possession, which was ordinarily little short of Talleyrandesque, the detective had momentarily given way to the supreme astonishment which this wholly unexpected frankness on the part of his visitor had caused him.

It was almost like a shock.

"I do confess it!" he exclaimed. "You have fulfilled your promise to the letter."

"Have I not?" in high good-humor. "Now can you remember to have seen me before this morning at the house of our incorruptible and highly-moral mutual friend the banker? Ha, ha, ha!"

Old Grip shook his head.

"No," he replied, "though your face dimly suggests some familiarity in my memory. But, of course, you are known to me by reputation."

"That goes without saying. Otherwise, you were scarcely a veteran detective of note. But I warn you, my friend, I am not through with my surprises yet."

"Cut away! By the way, my wife and I just arose from luncheon before your entrance, and if I might offer—"

"Thanks, no! for I just arose from luncheon before coming here—at Papa Goldkirk's palace, mind you, though with the *pater* pleasantly conspicuous by his absence, and only the adorable Miss Blanche as my entertainer."

"Still we shall have some beer, if you say so, and there are some fairish cigars at your elbow."

"With all my heart!"

The beer being provided, and Mr. Jud Jelliffe, of the many aliases, having gayly lighted a cigar, his spirits, capital as they had been from the outset, seemed to rise with the occasion.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, airily; "this is comfort. Now we can be said to be *en train*. Capital beer, too!" smacking his lips over a first glassful. "Do you know, my dear Crimmins, your American lager is a glorious institution? Gad! on a sultry afternoon such as this I prefer it to champagne itself. Thanks! the beauty of it is that you can keep on swilling the stuff without end, the one glass creating but an agreeable thirst for its successor. Well, well; where are we? Yes; you had never met me before this morning. There's where I had the advantage of you, old fellow; for I saw you last night, and recognized you at that."

"You are sure of that?"

"I should say I was sure!"

"How and where?"

"At the laundry-office in your countryman's disguise—you and the little fellow. The deuce! it was a circus. And how you did humbug the venerable Griscom, besides capsizing that dumb-head of a brother of mine! Ha, ha, ha! Too fresh by a jugful, that brother of mine. I shall have to take him in hand. What! I've scored you another eye-opener? Confess it!"

But the detective was altogether too chagrined to speak for the nonce.

What good his oft-vaunted success in disguises, if thus penetrable at a glance, and by an eye of whose very existence he had been unaware?

Mortification was no name for his humbled pride and cheapened self-esteem at that moment.

"You saw and penetrated all this?" he at last found the voice to exclaim.

"Else how could I speak of it?"

"True. Where were you?"

"That would be giving myself away. However, all in good time. I mean to keep nothing back. To tell the truth," filling and emptying his glass afresh with no little gusto, "I rather enjoy this sort of thing."

"You seem to," dryly.

"The deuce! don't be dashed. If your detective's art for once proved penetrable, it was only so to the sharpest eyes in Europe, if not in the world."

"I believe you."

"You may. Besides my being here now, with these extraordinary admissions, is a direct compliment to your professional ability, as you will presently understand."

"Let me question you a bit."

"Drive away!" hilariously.

"Why are you such a mystery anent that steam laundry connection?"

"You to ask such a question! What rogue doesn't live by mystery!—and the deeper the mystery the better living!"

"True in the main; though much of your mysteriousness seems to have been altogether unnecessary."

"Are you sure of that? Didn't it puzzle you just a trifle?"

"Granted; for the time being it did."

"And couldn't have been sustained against you for any considerable length of time? Granted in turn. Hence I am here showing up my hand."

"Count Montalbert, or whichever name you may prefer for the present—"

"That will do, if you've no objection."

"None whatever. Count Montalbert, you are a very extraordinary man!"

"Am I not? And perhaps I am not the less extraordinary for puzzling you afresh with this unexpected and unsolicited frankness on my part?"

"True."

"That also shall be made clear to you before we separate."

"I hope so."

"You will not be disappointed."

"What I could not understand was your periodical inquiries at the laundry, in your present character, for Mrs. Griscom, only to find her absent."

The veteran rogue burst into a pleasant laugh. "All prearranged, merely to lighten the mystery."

"The woman is your pal, then?"

"An old friend, sir, a very old friend—tried and trusted."

"Humph! And your Moresby character?"

"Simply my own, under another name. Fortunately, you haven't got me in any of your American rogues' galleries yet."

"And the laundry establishment itself?"

"A *bona fide* business for Griscom's pecuniary profit, with myself as her financial backer. But, of course, it wouldn't exist, save also as my convenience."

"In what way?"

"You obtained a glimpse into that little private hallway and stair?"

"Yes."

"Rather neat, eh, not to say luxuriously suggestive?"

"It struck me that way."

"My friend, I also am luxurious by nature, both suggestively and really. In fact, even old Goldkirk can't go me much better in that line, bloated with money though he be."

"Ah! it is your retreat, then—somewhere up at the head of the little staircase."

"My friend, you have my secret. A retreat? Yes; and none lovelier, more sumptuous, more Oriental. Even that wine-bibbing old hypocrite Goldkirk's at the top of his bank building can't surpass my laundry-den. Ever seen his?"

"No; though I probably shall."

"Doubtless."

There was a momentary silence.

CHAPTER XII.

THE COUNT CONTINUES HIS SURPRISES.

"WELL," continued the detective's strange visitor at last, "have I made myself sufficiently plain as to the laundry mystery, as I may call it, and my object in maintaining it up to the present time?"

"I suppose so," replied the detective. "With such a flood of revelations as you have so generously vouchsafed, it were scarcely polite to insist on too much *minutiae*."

"Oh, the deuce! but I am going to do better than that by you, my friend. Give me your strict attention."

"You have it."

"I am not the burglar of the Occidental National Bank, as you doubtless suppose, though I can place my hand upon him at any hour; and may do so ultimately, and for your benefit, though that remains to be seen."

"Smile, if you will, but what I tell you is the unvarnished truth."

"The name of the real criminal, together with the whereabouts of the swag (which I am not altogether positive of myself—I only wish I was)

is the only important secret that it is my intention to withhold from you at present.

"As Henry Moresby, I became the associate and friend of Claude Markham, two years ago.

"I use the word 'friend' advisedly"—here the man's voice and manner became deeply earnest—"and in the truest, best sense.

"The young man had not been long married, and was newly thrown upon the world, desperate, all but characterless, through the vengeful spite of that infernally black-hearted, specious hypocrite, Clifford Goldkirk. Claude was in a bad way. If he hadn't altogether fallen among thieves, he was tangled up, socially and otherwise, with a tough crowd.

"I befriended him as I had never befriended mortal man before. I saved him—not only from his associates, but from himself.

"The modest but sufficient employment in which he was engaged at the time of that villain, Goldkirk, fastening upon him this unjust suspicion, and thus compelling his flight (on my advice) was procured for him through my agency—indirect, of course.

"I still love the young man, and mean to see him through this thing safe and sound. As for the young and beautiful wife, she is simply an earthly angel—one of the purest and noblest of women.

"Utterly bad as I have been, and unmitigatedly corrupt as I am at this hour, I would as cheerfully sacrifice my life—even my liberty, which is dearer yet—to shield her from misfortune or misery as if she were my own sister and I had a sister once—an only sister.

"But, enough of myself in this sentimental line," with a hard laugh, which at once seemed to nullify and obliterate the feeling earnestness with which he had been speaking. "I am now approaching a certain proposition which I intend to make to you, and which will doubtless explain in a great measure the unwonted, not to say unprecedented, frankness of these disclosures which you have found so surprising.

"I will, therefore, first tell you what I offer on my part, in return for a certain assistance that I shall request on yours.

"Within one month from this time I shall place the real burglar of the Occidental National Bank in your hands, together with information that shall result, almost immediately, in the recovery of the stolen cash and bonds.

"You will thus reap your money-reward, to say nothing of the increased advantage to your professional reputation.

"In addition to this—But hold on! Am I right in surmising that you believe in Claude Markham's innocence of this charge, and are interested in seeing his vindication before the world, together with such a resumption of domestic happiness as that may imply for both himself and his noble wife?"

"You are right in that surmise," responded the detective, slowly, "perfectly right."

"Good, and welcome! In addition to what I have already set down, then, I engage myself also to effect that happy vindication in the young couple's case, as just outlined, and within the same prescribed time—one month hence.

"Nay, more—one thing more. I engage to bring the villain Goldkirk's treachery home to him, with a punishment such as only he can fitly appreciate—well, as to make him wish himself in Hades for a cooling change, before I shall have done with him."

As Montalbert came to a pause, with a peculiar look, it occurred to the detective to ask:

"And what is the punishment you design for the bank president's scoundrelism?"

The other repeated his hard laugh, with a shrug of his powerful shoulders.

"Look you," he replied, with a significant downward and crushing movement of the thumb, "I shall have him everlastingly *thus*! You understand?"

"I think I do."

"Bah! A world-pampered banker under a thief's thumb! Gods! but *won't* he squirm! And yet twist, twist! wrench, wrench! will turn and grind the screw, and how he will bleed—chink, chink, chink!—so long as there is coin or paper in his accursed coffers!" and Montalbert closed with his low, deadly laugh.

The instinctive liking which the detective had begun to feel for the fellow was more or less dissipated by his voice and manner, notwithstanding the little occasion he had for pitying the banker's prospective sufferings.

"But let me not count my chickens before they are hatched, or even my eggs so much as pipped," continued the rogue, with a repetition of his less disagreeable laugh, while tossing off a fresh glass of beer. "Look here, friend Crimmins, it is to you I look for the realization of these rosy—or let us say, golden, or rustling—gold-chinking and bank-note-rustling dreams."

"To me!"

"Why, of course! All that I have promised I engage myself to perform for you to the letter—and I suppose you will acknowledge that it is an agreeable outlook in your favor?"

"I do acknowledge that."

"And now comes the pivotal question—what are you to do for me in return, to clinch the proposition and cement the bargain?"

"Ah! help you get the banker by the throat, I suppose—or by the purse-strings, which is the same thing?"

"Not quite; and yet yes, indirectly. That would follow as a consequence, as you will presently understand."

"What is it you would demand of me in return?" Crimmins abruptly demanded.

Montalbert looked at him with his softest and pleasantest smile.

"Simply this: Hands off while I marry the daughter!"

Old Grip started.

Much as he had anticipated, or might have anticipated, the answer, it struck upon him jar-ingly, wickedly.

"You will now understand the object of my extraordinary frankness with you, my friend," Montalbert hastened to say, without waiting for his answer. "I said it was a compliment to your professional ability, and so you must find it. Knowing you to be sleuthing on my heels, I knew that sooner or later you must spoil my game; therefore I concluded to meet and counter you, if possible, as I have done. What is your answer?"

Old Grip had turned the whole matter over in his mind with lightning-like precision and rapidity, and was still undecided.

The fellow's promises were a glittering bait, and there was a smack of their being made in genuine sincerity, notwithstanding that the detective was scarcely prepared for full belief in his assertion that the burglary of the bank was the work of another hand than his (Montalbert's) own.

Still more—here was the happiness of an unsuspecting young girl in the balance, shallow and foolish as she might be, and notwithstanding the contemptuous and deserved dislike in which the detective held her rascally sire.

Montalbert seemed to divine the doubts that were passing in his companion's mind, for, after a moment's pause, he hastened to say:

"There is one thing in my favor, old fellow, that you must understand distinctly—and proofs can be furnished of its truth, if required.

"Don't think," with his soft laugh, "I am going to ask you to believe me a non-fortune-hunter, or anything so preposterous. No; the one remaining thing I would have you understand is in the young lady's favor.

"It is this: I really care for her, and—I am not married already, nor have I ever been, strange as it may seem to you, my life and career considered."

CHAPTER XIII.

OLD GRIP'S TEMPTATION.

THE detective still hesitated in his reply to Montalbert's extraordinary and tempting proposition, and something opportunely occurred at this juncture which afforded him yet more deliberation in the matter.

There was a knock at the door, and a telegram was placed in his hands.

When he had resumed his seat, he abruptly said, while furtively watching the effect of the announcement upon his companion:

"Kelly, the assaulted bank watchman, is dead of his wound!"

But Montalbert, beyond a slight expression of natural surprise, did not change so much as a hair.

"Who's Kelly?" he asked.

The detective gave an inner sigh of disappointment, for his momentary test, as just applied, had failed.

The telegram was from the hospital, and its announcement thus made murder as a direct accompaniment of the bank burglary; a grave fact scarcely to be lightly considered by the real robber concerned—for no thief, however indurated or veteran, can be suddenly brought home to accomplished murder as the associate of his lesser crime without an appalled sensation, it being the death-penalty addition to his State-Prison dread; and yet, here was this man, even after the purport of the telegram had been more fully explained to him, evincing not so much as the tremor of an eyelid over the announcement.

"Poor devil!" was Montalbert's sole comment. "But then," philosophically, "a knuck always incurs just such chances, as a matter of course. And, to tell the truth, Crimmins, I am really sorry for Jack Stal—Hullo!" with a look of genuine alarm; "it was nearly off my tongue, and then where would I have been with this proposition of mine!"

"I was merely going to say that I feel even sorrier for the operator than for his victim. Rather a good, up-and-up man, you must understand, in spite of his obduracy with me in regard to those letters."

Old Grip caught at the word.

"The letters?" he echoed.

"Yes, yes!"

"Ah! the banker's missing letters?"

"Of course."

"Then you—you haven't had access to those letters as yet?"

Montalbert broke into his hearty laugh.

"My dear Crimmins, what a question!" he exclaimed. "Would I be here with my present

proposition to you, with those precious letters in my possession, or even with the remotest chance of getting hold of them?"

"Ah! perhaps not."

"I should smile! Why, with those letters as my open-sesame to the banker's fears, I would be already up to my armpits in his brimming pile, while taking my leisure with Miss Blanche! Whereas, now—worse luck for me, though all the better for you—I must necessarily have the girl as my preliminary measure."

"It would seem so. Montalbert, what do you know about those letters?"

"Only what I have learned, or have been led to infer, from my intimacy with the Markhams—and that is enough, in all conscience!"

"Am I right in supposing that they ruinously compromise the banker with respect to something else than his mere ridiculousness in so boring Mrs. Markham with his hopeless love-making prior to her marriage, when she was his daughter's governess?"

"You are. Wait a bit. I shall violate no confidence in giving you the story in outline."

"I wish you would."

"As you are perhaps aware, Mrs. Markham is an exceedingly handsome woman to this day; and she must be thirty or more by this time, to say nothing of the wearing anxiety and unhappiness she has passed through.

"What must she have been at twenty-three, or thereabouts—five or six years ago, when she first took charge of *la petite Blanche*, the motherless and willful little daughter of papa Goldkirk's house and heart? Absolutely radiant, no doubt.

"Our money-bags was not long in thinking so, at all events.

"As near as I can gather, he began to pester the young lady with his marital aspirations almost from the beginning. Gad! it must have been a case of December and May, and I doubt not that he flatly offered his heart and hand on the first day of her arrival.

"She probably refused the offer as flatly as it was made, but this did not save her from all manner of annoyances and embarrassments. One might have supposed Goldkirk to know better, but he seemed to be completely infatuated from the start. Refusing to believe in the sincerity of the young lady's first refusal of his glittering offer—and, for the life of me, I can't exactly understand it myself—he provoked frequent repetitions of it, and apparently with little or no discouragement. He followed her everywhere, was spooney in the parlor no less than at public entertainments, and would hop around to pick up her fan or handkerchief with the spry servility of a Parisian dandy at a prima donna's reception. Even the ridicule which he incurred at every hand did not change his ludicrous course, or perhaps he was too bewitched to notice it at the time.

"But, the comment thus challenged at last became sufficiently unbearable to the object of these uniquely hopeless attentions, howsoever they might be lost upon the man who persisted in making such a guy of himself.

"Her threats to throw up her employment had no effect, or merely called forth solemn promises of amendment, to be broken as rapidly as made. Why did she remain at all? you might ask.

"Who knows? She was poor, for one thing, and her salary was liberal. She had probably already lost her heart to Claude, for another thing. And, finally, she had perhaps come to love and pity her young charge, Blanche.

"Be that as it may, with the exception of a period of one month, or a little longer, when her employer's pestering insistence upon his hopeless suit for her hand compelled her to seek a respite elsewhere, remain she did.

"Think of it! A poor young woman, alone and comparatively friendless in the world, flying from the marriage-offers of a decently respectable, not unattractive and fairly well-preserved millionaire, with the income of a princess as pin-money! By Jupiter! it is unparalleled! As well suppose an army of starving tramps fleeing from volleys of canister shot with plum-pudding and greenbacks! I can't understand it yet!"

"I can," interposed the detective, "on the assumption of absolute nobleness and independence of character on the young woman's part."

"Ah, well, perhaps. But to return to our sheep, as the Italians say: it was that brief period of absence that was the occasion of this missing correspondence I am so anxious to obtain."

"What do you think it consists of?"

"Of a dozen or more fool-letters from Goldkirk to the young lady. The latter contributed but two answers to the correspondence;—his, for the most part, a mere repetition on paper of the frantic and persistent prayers for her hand which had been so unsuccessful by word of mouth."

"But the mere folly of such stuff couldn't cause him such agonized anxiety. A man is at liberty to be a fool without fear of the rope or State Prison."

"Softly! One letter—the gem of the collection—was sent to the young lady by mistake. It was a letter newly received by Goldkirk from

an old confederate of his in a now forgotten forgery, setting forth the crime with the most elaborate details—such a letter as might State Prison the banker at this day, if once made public!"

"Oho! That is something, to be sure!"

"Yes, I should say it was; and Goldkirk's subsequent letters were no longer love-prayers *in toto*, but terrified beseechings that this mis-sent letter might be returned to him at any cost. See?"

The detective nodded.

"Miss Crust was not such a fool," continued the adventurer, "as not to see that she had her tormentor on the hip at last. She finally wrote him in reply, flatly refusing to return the incriminating letter. She would not use it against him, unless driven to desperation, but would simply retain it in self-defense.

"He thereupon wrote her a last letter, representing that his young daughter was seriously ill, and beseeching her to return to her charge, if but for a short time.

"She unsuspectingly consented. This was but the beginning of the end. Notwithstanding that the governess found the illness of her young charge to have been grossly exaggerated, for several weeks thereafter she was comparatively freed from the man's importunities to marry her.

"But in the meantime he had heard of her betrothal to Markham, and his jealous rage was seething under his mask of calmness. His weak and sinister character betrayed the real man that he was.

"He demanded that she should throw over her lover and marry him forthwith, injudiciously coupling the demand with threats of vengeance upon the heads of both in the event of her refusal.

"She replied to him with the contempt he deserved, and quitted his house summarily and forever; but only to find that the lock of one of her trunks had been secretly tampered with and the letters abstracted.

"The banker was no longer in her power! A few weeks thereafter she married Claude, who had already been discharged from Goldkirk's employment on a trumped-up charge that he had become habitually dishonest and profligate. Then the trials of the young couple began. You know the rest."

CHAPTER XIV.

FOR HONOR AND HONOR.

"WHY, do you think, should Goldkirk," was the detective's first question following upon the impressive pause that succeeded the completion of Montalbert's remarkable piece of secret history, "have been so insensate as not to have destroyed such a self-incriminating correspondence instantly upon its coming into his possession, instead of preserving it, even in his apparently impregnable bank-safe, or anywhere else?"

Montalbert shrugged his shoulders and elevated his eyebrows, while making a fresh requisition upon the beer-pitcher, which had been replenished by the housemaid from time to time in the course of the prolonged interview.

"Why, indeed! Is there any accounting for the invariable shallowness of even the cleverest rascals upon some one vital point or other in even the best and deepest laid of their plots?"

"That is true."

"I speak by the book, you know," with a return of his original gayety. "Voilà, my friend! Dip us as she may in her charmed waters of impregnability, there remains ever the unarmored spot where Fate pinches us by the heel in the dipping, and where the random arrow pierces us to the death, as in the case of Achilles, in the bitter end."

The detective could not but smile wonderingly at this moralizing (wholly new, even in his veteran experience) on the part of the brilliant but self-confessed social outlaw before him.

"It is a fatuity," continued Montalbert, "that is sufficiently providential for society, though tough enough on the rogue who would make her his prey—his oyster, which, like *Pistol*—or *Poins*, or *Bardolph*, which of the rare rascals was it?—he would open with the sword of his cunning, only to be hand-nipped in the end, when—ha, ha, ha! what dream-transformations are in this cat-nap of existence?—click! and the shell-jaws of the metaphorical bivalve become the spring-catch of your professional dippers, your pitiless handcuffs."

"Why is it that your ablest murderer, or most accomplished adventuress, must so often persist in that photographic diary-business, for instance, that comes in at his or her final crisis, fatal as the handwriting on the wall, and yet self-woven, self-evoked from the very first?"

"Or perhaps you may have read Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, and can recall the infatuation of his persecutor, the murderer Squire Falkland, in preserving the blood-rusted knife which proves his final ruin?—Effectively dramatized, by the way, in the old play of *The Iron Chest*, wherein the guilty but pitiable squire figures as Sir Edward Mortimer.

"The old story of the one vulnerable spot—the forgotten heel-pinch!

"Puzzles, my friend, psychological unanswerables, trivial in their first seeming, but unerringly fatal in their consequences.

"Have I been more circumspect than the rest? A little diary of my own might give the lie to whatever vaunt my vanity might prompt in the decidedly shaky premises.

"But, look here!" suddenly rising, and with laughing abruptness; "how about the proposition that brings me here? You still hesitate?"

It was a fact that Old Grip did still hesitate. He was not without his weaknesses, and the temptation to promise so little (notwithstanding that it might involve Blanche Goldkirk's heart-shipwreck, if that could be called little) for so much, was already making a serious breach in the citadel of his honor, though he was not yet ready to quite capitulate.

"I do hesitate," he admitted.

"Why should you?" urged Montalbert, with renewed earnestness. "Think, in conjunction with all that I offer, of how little is asked—Neutrality—hands off—that is all."

"By Jupiter!" with sudden passion; "isn't the girl's victimization something?"

Montalbert laughed, snapping his fingers airily.

"A hard word for jubilation, my friend," he cried. "Listen—it is in the air! Bridal bells and roses! with that old wretch of a bank president to pay the piper. Besides, I was never other than gentle with women, and the girl really touches me."

"Give me time," moodily. "Besides—well, I just can't answer you definitely now. By the way, what might Griscom, as you call her, say to it?"

Montalbert snapped his fingers again and fairly exploded with laughter.

"The fossil! the mummy!" he cried, merrily.

"Ah, my friend, for a grandmother, or even an aunt, the dear woman might tear her cap-strings a bit."

"I'll think it over."

"Good! bring me your answer to-night or the next. Eh?"

"Yes."

"A word as to my secret sumptuousness in the laundry building. You may have remarked a narrow covered way between buildings to the right of the office?"

"I did."

"Pass through into a small area, where a knock on the apparently blank wooden wall to the left—three knocks in swift succession, by the way—will cause an unsuspected entrance to open. *Sabé?*"

Old Grip nodded.

"Good! To-night or the next?"

"The next—to-morrow night."

"Thanks! And you will be strictly neutral at least until our next interview?"

"Yes."

"Monsieur le Comte Henri Montalbert," who had already taken up his hat—an irreproachable tile—and thrown his fashionable satin-faced fall overcoat over his arm, smiled, nodded, and was gone.

Oblivious for the moment to everything but the thronging new thoughts and considerations which the extraordinary interview had churned confusedly up in his mind, the detective, remained for some moments buried in a troubled reverie, his eyes blankly fixed upon the door through which his tempter had disappeared.

A slight movement in the room roused him to look around at last.

Luella, his wife, was before him!

"Oh!" he exclaimed, not noticing an ominous pallor in her face; "you must have overheard everything. By Jove! my dear, I had forgotten all about it."

"Everything!"

With the repetition of that one word, in a changed voice, she slightly advanced, touching his arm; and then for the first time he noticed how pale she was, and what a strained, anxious look was come into her lovely face.

"What is the matter?" he cried, in alarm.

"My dear, are you ill?"

He would have taken her in his arms, but that she gently repelled him.

"Not yet, Edward!" she said, impressively;

"not till you tell me just how you shall answer that man's—that devil's—proposition!"

"Oh!" uncomfortably.

"Yes; and you ask if I am ill. Yes; ill at ease—sick at heart with what I have overheard!"

"Well, it was a wonderful interview; and that story of poor Maud Markham was just too pitiful—pitiful and blood-boiling."

"I am not alluding to that—distressing as it undoubtedly was."

"To what, then?"

"As if you could not, or would not, know!" with a reproachful look, accompanied by a quiver of the lip.

"Oh!—ah! perhaps—ur—with reference to—the young girl—to Miss Goldkirk?"

"I am glad you have got enough conscience remaining to understand me, sir!"

"Conscience, eh? Well, now look here, Luella, aren't you coming it a bit strong?"

"Not half strong enough!"

"Why, hang it all! what is the gilt-edged,

gold-fastened old financier's daughter to you and me? Besides, for aught we know to the contrary, she may be a veritable chip of the old block—"

"Silence, and for shame, Edward Crimmins!" exclaimed the young wife, indignantly. "Why did you dare—how could you dare, as an honest man and a man of honor—hesitate in your answer to that accomplished scoundrel's detestable proposition?"

"Oh, come, come!" doggedly.

"How could you do it? As your wife, and as a woman, with the rest of womankind for my sisters, I demand to know!"

"Well, I didn't vouchsafe him any answer, as you must have learned."

"The more shame for you!"

"In what, pray?"

"In that you did not hurl back, with scorn and contempt, his infamous proposition into his teeth! That is what I mean to say."

"My dear girl! you are a little hot. Men don't bargain, or do business, in that way."

"Business—bargaining, and with such a shameless, self-celebrating wretch—the happiness of a young girl of nineteen at stake! Well, God be praised! women are incapable of business of that sort. Men—or such as call themselves men—can have the monopoly of it, and welcome!"

"Tush! tush!"

"Edward Gripson, if you had not hesitated—half committal as the mere fact of that hesitation was—if you had given your assent to that scoundrel's proposition here in this room, in my hearing, I—I would have left you on the spot, never to live with you again!"

He looked up quickly into her white, set face, something in her tone seeming to touch him to the marrow.

"Luella, you mean this?"

"I do! I do!"

"You must be beside yourself!"

"Not so; but wholly with myself—at one with clear knowledge of what is due from manhood to virtue, to innocence, to inexperience in womanhood! And now I want to know just what answer you are going to take to that man when you see him again."

Old Grip slowly rose, and paced the floor in unwonted agitation, his mind in a whirl of contending thoughts and emotions.

But the troubled look grew less and less, and finally his face wholly cleared.

Suddenly he turned, and threw open his arms.

If the citadel of his honor had trembled to a capitulation under the tempter's assaults, wifely vigilance had leaped into the breach, and it was saved!

Old Grip was the true heart again!

"Luella!" he cried, brokenly.

"My husband!" with a glad cry.

"You have conquered! Montalbert shall have but one answer, come what may—rejection, refusal, contempt!"

She sprung into his arms with a relieved sob, and there had been none purer, tenderer nor more self-devoted since their bridal morn than the embrace which followed.

CHAPTER XV.

A BANK PRESIDENT'S RELAXATIONS.

CHEESE-IT came home that evening with nothing specially new to report, save that Mrs. Griscom had reappeared in the laundry-office, after a prolonged absence lasting the greater part of the day, and in an exceptionally surly humor.

"I thought the old girl would snap my head off at one time," said he. "And she black-guarded Dick Moresby about the waste of coal in the engine-room, besides blowing up Lucy Jarvis sky high for a small mistake in a Jew family's wash-bill. I'd have resigned my position p. d. q., for a keg of beer."

"Better hang on for a while yet," genially counseled Old Grip, for whom, as he supposed, the boy's continuance at the laundry had now become a matter of comparatively small moment. "Griscom's connection with both Moresby and Count Montalbert is yet to be explained, you know."

Later on, he bade his wife good-night, and set off for down-town, having determined to seek that second interview with the banker at his private "den" forthwith.

It was about nine o'clock when he reached the building owned and partly occupied by the Occidental National Bank, which had scarcely a rival among the towering and palatial business piles in the neighborhood of Wall street, Broadway and Trinity Church.

The streets were almost wholly deserted, as it were, at that hour and later on, while only a faint twinkling of lights in the narrow corner-windows of the far-away uppermost story served to relieve the hushed and darkened lifelessness of the huge edifice.

A ring at the side-street basement entrance, however, brought to view, somewhat tardily, a uniformed colored janitor of gigantic proportions, who eyed the visitor with surly suspicion while the latter was making his desire to see Mr. Goldkirk known.

"I'se a standin' order, sab, to admit you

whenever you should drap in," said the janitor, at last opening the door just wide enough to permit the detective to slip through, "an' at ain't my fault, if Mistah Goldkirk done find hisself sort ob cotched up by a s'prise in seein' you. De elewater am to de left sah, whar you done see dat glimmerin' gas-jet a-burnin'."

He carefully re-secured the entrance, and followed the visitor into the car.

Then up they went, and music and laughter, together with a sound of clinking glasses, gradually became audible as they ascended.

At last, as the up-floating cabinet came to a pause with a slight jar at the topmost well-lighted landing, the festive sounds were found to issue from an apartment separated by wide folding-doors from the superbly-appointed hallway into which they stepped.

The music, which had become distinct by this time, suddenly stopped, and in its place there was roared out a rollicking drinking-song at the top of an exceptionally powerful pair of lungs.

This was followed by a confused hammering of glasses upon a table, mingled with a chorus of applauding voices, among which one that the detective recognized as Mr. Bank President Goldkirk's, in a decidedly mellowed condition, was heard to call out:

"Once again, Manly, once again! Sing her out, my flower!"

The janitor turned to his charge with a broad grin that showed his ivories to the full.

"De Daffy-down-dillies am a bloomin'!" he remarked.

Then he paused for a moment in a comic state of hesitation.

"By Jeeminently!" he guffawed at last, scratching his woolly head, reflectively; "de boss am mighty pertickler when de Daffies am in full swig, but it ain't my fault if he am s'prised. He done told me to be shuah to fetch yo' straight up to him widout ceremony soon as yo' done mention de name."

"Still," suggested the detective, rather enjoying the situation, "he mightn't relish an interruption on such an occasion. I wouldn't like you to risk losing your job on my account, you know."

"Sho!" contemptuously, and with a toss of the head; "no danger ob dat, sah!"

"Still, you must get good pay for this sort of night-work, with your secrecy thrown in?"

"It am not de pay, sah, dough dat ain't to be sneezed at," significantly, "but I done know too much, I does!"

Then he signed the visitor to accompany him, and marched straight toward the folding-doors, the thick carpet effectually deadening the sound of their advance, even had there otherwise been any danger of it being heard above the din within, which there wasn't.

The colossus hesitated a last instant to compose his countenance, which at once assumed the gravity of an Oriental eunuch's with a death-warrant on its lips.

He suddenly flung the doors wide apart, calling forth in stentorian tones:

"Mistah Crimmins, de detective!"

There was a confused break in the hubbub, and then Mr. Goldkirk, who was presiding at the feast in full blast, rushed toward the door with both hands angrily extended, his face flushed, his eyessparkling with anger, and something very like an execration on his lips.

But it was too late.

The detective had already "sized up" the revelers, among whom he recognized several other officers of the bank, together with a number of gentlemen (all middle-aged or older) high in the world of finance and social respectability, and nothing was to be done but to make a virtue of the exposure that had been brought about.

He accordingly made an opening by advancing smilingly, and seizing the banker by the hand.

"And is this the Daffodil Coterie, my dear sir, some inkling of which has got abroad?" he cried jovially. "Well, it is only your own fault that I have interrupted the rites, and you certainly seem to be having an innocently royal and festive time."

"What?" and Goldkirk recovered his presence of mind, as the offending janitor beat a retreat; "you are one of the liberal-minded sort, then, Crimmins, who don't see any harm in our relaxations from the cares of business in this companionable way?"

"Harm?" laughing. "Why, none in the least—if your constitutions can stand it!"

"Crimmins, you are a trump! Come right away and be introduced to our 'Clubbers!'"

There was a ringing cheer from the festive board, and Crimmins was incontinently dragged up to make one of the roystering crew.

The music, which was furnished by several German professionals installed in one corner of the *salon*, struck up afresh, "Oh, He's a Jelly Good Fellow!" was straightway roared in chorus, to the clinking of glasses and the popping of corks; and the interrupted festivities of the Daffodil Coterie were once more at flood-tide.

"A heath to our guest of the evening!" cried Mr. Goldkirk, when the song was finished. "Gentlemen and fellow-Daffodils, this is to be

drank standing and with solemnity—after the ancient custom of the Daffodil Coterie."

The result was somewhat surprising to the uninitiated guest.

Instead of standing, every "Clubber" drained his glass, and then, at a preconcerted signal they all fell off their chairs in divers undignified attitudes—under the table, about the table-legs, sprawling singly or one over another.

"Why, how do you make that out to be drinking a health standing?" demanded the mystified guest, when all had resumed their seats.

"As a standing joke, of course!" was shouted in response, amid yells of laughter.

CHAPTER XVI.

"RELAXATION, SIR, STRICTLY RELAXATION!" BY this extraordinary demonstration the detective was declared to have been made the adopted child of the Daffodil Coterie for the time being, and the symposium was renewed with even greater vigor than before.

Mr. Goldkirk himself sung a song; then an enormously fat gentleman, whose capacity for champagne seemed to be as limitless as a brewer's apprentice for lager beer, essayed a horn-pipe, amid roars of laughter; while a very thin and cadaverous broker, whose word was his bond in the Stock Exchange, undertook to imitate Mr. Irving's mannerisms in "Hamlet" with a painstaking solemnity that was rendered excruciatingly funny by the fact that he was too befuddled to wholly distinguish the inseparability of the "To be or not to be" soliloquy from "The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck," both of which productions he mixed up as inextricably as the different wines whose intermingling was doubtless responsible for his vagaries; and similar idiocies followed one another with hardly a break.

"What do you think of it?" cried Mr. Goldkirk, slapping the detective on the back. "Re-creative enjoyment, eh?"

"It's enjoyment, anyway—of its kind," was the non-committal response.

"Relaxation; my boy, strictly relaxation! Pitch in! let her hum! Aha! I see you like a little innocent unbending of this sort quite as well as myself."

The detective waited till his right-hand neighbor (who had pillowed a tired head upon his shoulder, where he was peacefully snoring) was so obliging as to slip out of sight under the table, and then replied courteously that unbending was also good enough in its way, if one retained the ability of straightening up at pleasure.

"Those are my sentiments, too!" interposed an exaggeratedly urbane gentleman who sat opposite. "Straight as a string, even if drunk as a wheel! That's my motto to the crack o' doom! Sir, I would like the pleasure of drinking a glass of wine with you."

As he spoke, he rose majestically, lifted his glass, wavered a little, smiled deprecatingly, tripped over a cuspidor, and, with a sort of flop, quite unexpectedly stood on his head.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Goldkirk. "My dear Duckley," to the urbane gentleman, "you are certainly on a string, if drunk as a wheel!"

"Mizzer President," blandly responded the other, picking himself up with a grave dignity of mien, "I second the motion."

Goldkirk dug the detective in the ribs with his fat forefinger.

"Good time, eh, Crimmins?" he exclaimed, a trifle huskily. "Have some more wine! Relaxation's the thing, eh?"

"Oh, yes!" replied Crimmins, gayly. "In moderation, I suppose there is nothing like a little harmless relaxation of this sort, my friend. Solomon indulged in it."

"Those are the sentiments!" slightly hiccupped the banker. "Ah, my friend, it is the innocence of the motive that robs such pleasure of its harm. Do try another glass of this extra dry! Relaxation, sir, strictly relaxation!"

But, putting aside the proffered "extra dry," the detective took the opportunity to say privately to the banker:

"I had better call some other time when your innocent relaxations are a little less pronounced. You are scarcely in the mood to discuss our business affairs at present."

But, to his surprise, Goldkirk's face instantly cleared, and he abruptly rose from his divan with a steady and alert air.

"You are mistaken," he replied. "Business must never be wholly neglected, even in the midst of the most guileless enjoyment. My fellow-daffodils, amuse yourselves without me for a while. There's wine *carte blanche*. And just step this way, my friend."

The associate daffodils immediately struck up a fresh chorus to the time-old words, "We won't go home till morning."

Goldkirk led the way into a small, exquisitely furnished cabinet, considerably apart from the large apartments.

Here he exchanged his dress coat for a more casually flowered wrapper, sunk into an easy-chair before a briskly burning grate-fire, with a writing-table and materials convenient, and, signing the detective to occupy a similar seat, he looked up keenly and observantly.

"Of course, Crimmins," said he, a little grim-

ly, "I had somewhat forgotten the sweeping terms of my next appointment with you here, or you wouldn't have surprised me as you have to-night through the dunder-headed officiousness of that black lunkhead. I shall merely ask and expect your reticence—your absolute reticence," with a meaning look, "as to what you have seen here."

"Depend upon me for that," Mr. Goldkirk, promptly replied the detective. "Still, there can't be any real harm—perhaps—in such things as a mere relaxation, you know."

"Relaxation be—shammed!" disgustedly. "It's high old fun, and the sort I like. I may be a hypocrite in the presence of the world, but I sha'n't attempt to be so any longer in yours. It wouldn't pay; and, besides, you will doubtless like me better, and we shall get along together more expeditiously, through my dropping the necessary mask."

Here was suddenly developed a phase of the man's character wholly unlooked-for on the part of the detective, and not the less agreeable for that.

"You are right, sir," rejoined Old Grip. "I do like you better thus, and doubt not that we shall understand each other more thoroughly in consequence. And as for the high old fun, as you designate it, it's doubtless all very well in its way, though not the sort I incline to."

"Now to business. Crimmins, I've reconsidered the main matter. I sha'n't ask you again to arrest that young man, Claude Markham, for me. I'll not even pretend any longer to believe him actually guilty of the bank-robbery, for I never have really believed it. But, I do believe he has that missing correspondence—he and the wife together—I feel certain of it; and that correspondence I must have restored to me, win or lose, at any risk, or I am a ruined, guilt-covered man. I believe I make myself understood at last."

This unexpected bluntness from such an unexpected quarter almost took the detective's breath away; though he did not fail to understand that worldly calculation, or necessity of some sort, must have been chiefly if not altogether responsible for the change.

"You do, sir," he replied, with fresh heartiness, "and there would have been no obscurity nor misunderstanding whatever, Mr. Goldkirk, if you had only adopted this ingenious course from the start."

The banker, from whose face and manner the last vestige of sanctimoniousness had been eliminated for the time being, knitted his brows thoughtfully.

"Easier said than done," he said. "Crimmins, hypocrisy may become a habit—an ingrained part of a man's nature—like every other evil. But enough of that. I now meet you unmasked, as man to man, simply because circumstances compel me to do so. No allusion to that!" with a contemptuous glance in the direction of the roystering, which was being persistently kept up in the neighboring *salon*. "Whether you had surprised me to-night or not, the change would have come sooner or later. It had to!"

"I believe you. Pray go on, sir."

"But I want you to go on. Let us go right to the bottom of this thing."

"With all my heart."

"Well, why don't you ask me again how it is possible for Claude Markham to have those letters in his possession, and not to have brought me to my marrow-bones before this, as you did this morning?"

The detective laughed.

"Hold on!" said he. "That was only advanced as against your hypocritical assumption that the young man was guilty of the robbery—and murder, as it has now become. For, of course, you must have heard of the death of Kelly, the watchman?"

"Yes, yes! Well, all is still above-board now; and would you still put that question to me?"

"Yes; I see no reason why I shouldn't."

"I will tell you why I feel certain the letters are in the young couple's possession."

"In the first place, I feel instinctively that Claude Markham, through his whilom tough associations, knew of the robbery after its commission, we will say."

"Secondly, I wasn't honest with you in my assertions regarding the contents of the correspondence. They do compromise me irretrievably, and altogether apart from my infatuated desire to make the young lady my wife when she was a governess in my service."

"Thirdly, it was to the vital interest of both man and wife to obtain possession of that correspondence, in sheer self-defense against my declared animosity to them.—You see that I am perfectly frank with you at last?"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BANK PRESIDENT IN A NEW ASPECT. AS Mr. Goldkirk had come to an inquiring pause, the detective felt it incumbent upon him to make some sort of encouraging reply, the more readily in that much of his contempt, if not altogether dislike, for the man began to mollify in this unexpectedly new aspect of character which was presenting itself.

"You are indeed becoming frank at last, and with a vengeance!" he said, smiling. "I thank you for it, sir."

"I will continue then," resumed the banker, with a gesture. "Fourthly, then, Claude might have secured the letters from the bank-robber, and it is fair to assume that he did."

"Fifthly and lastly, the strange fact that the letters have not already been used against me, in a natural spirit of self-defense or reprisal on the part of the young couple, I charge to the exceptional magnanimity of the lady in the case. And that Maud Markham is a lady in every sense of the word—as exemplary as she is beautiful—I unhesitatingly at this late day contribute my unworthy testimony, much as I may have distressed and annoyed her in the past."

"There is your own objection to my theory answered at last. And now tell me what *you* think of it?"

The detective merely nodded genially, and his hesitation to reply on the instant seemed simply in order to turn the matter thoroughly over in his mind.

But he was really considering many things. First and most prominent in his thoughts being the extraordinary change of base in his companion's methods.

Men do not change their whole natures in a breath. Such transformations are merely, as a rule, a fresh form of newer and deeper dissimulation, or they may be said to smack of the sudden and emotional revival conversions which are so often as short-lived as they are pronounced. Mr. Goldkirk's sudden step from hypocrisy to ingenuousness was a little overdone, though it would scarcely do to let him know of the suspicion; since hypocrisy must be more or less fought with *finesse*, as fire with fire, the world over, just so long as the world itself is two-faced and insincere.

"You argue it ingeniously, sir," was accordingly the detective's cautious reply.

"But what do *you* think of it?"

"The theory seems tenable."

"Ha!" satisfiedly; "that is just what I have been wanting you to admit."

"Why so? What is it that you propose for me to do?"

"Can't you understand? The Markhams must be acquainted with my change of heart, or we will say change of procedure, with respect to them, forthwith."

"They won't believe it," said the detective, in his blunt way. "That is the long and short of that."

"Humph! but *you* believe me sincere in this, don't you?"

"I'll give you frankness for frankness, Mr. Goldkirk. I neither believe nor disbelieve in you. I am content to await the test of time and events."

"Well, sir, that is all I ask. But now I want you to go direct to the Markhams, and endeavor to get back those letters for me."

"I'll go, as a matter of course. But you can depend upon it they will demand some guarantee in return—supposing the letters to be in their possession."

"Naturally. What sort of guarantee do you suppose they will demand?"

"How should I know any better than yourself, or even so well? I haven't even the pleasure of their acquaintance."

"I had forgotten that. Well, you must make them a preliminary visit, and see just what can be done."

This was just the sort of commission that Old Grip most desired, inasmuch as it would effectually introduce him to the young couple, whose personal acquaintance he was, for obvious reasons, anxious to make.

"All right!" he replied. "When shall I go?"

"With the least possible delay."

"So be it. I shall run up to their Whip-poorwill retreat to-morrow, and, if possible, be back with my report in the evening."

"Just the thing! So I may regard that point as settled?"

"You may."

"Now there is another thing," said the banker, with a good deal of hesitation, not to say embarrassment.

"I am at your service, sir."

"Do you know anything about a certain Count Montalbert?"

"A little. Latterly a conspicuous man-about-town, I understand."

"The same. Have you seen or met the gentleman?"

"I saw him for the first time in your hallway this morning. He was entering as I was leaving."

"True; I remember now. But never before?" with a keen look.

"Never, to my knowledge," promptly; and it did not occur to the banker to ask if the detective had seen him *since*.

"Ha!" and Mr. Goldkirk drew a long breath, which was something like a sigh; "I am sorry for that."

"Why?" asked the detective.

"Well, I was in hopes you might tell me something about the man. Look here, Crimmins!" impulsively, "I'll be no less frank with you in this matter than in the other."

The detective nodded encouragingly.

"My daughter," continued the banker, "is, as you may have surmised, inclined to be romantic."

"Well, this Count Montalbert, after being fittingly introduced, has visited her, with my reluctant consent, for some time past."

"To tell the truth, he wants to marry her, while I have reason to believe that he has already engaged her affections."

"Now, I never went much on counts, or individuals of that ilk, and I strongly suspect this particular count of being a fraud."

"It sometimes happens that they are no 'count,'" said Old Grip, smiling.

"Exactly; and that is just what I want you to find out for me in the present instance."

"I'll look him up."

"You noted the man this morning?"

"Yes, though somewhat cursorily, as a matter of course."

"Still, you have a faculty of judging a man's character at a glance."

"Sometimes."

"Well, from the glimpse of him that you had, how did the gentleman impress you?"

"It was only a glimpse, you must remember."

"Good enough! a glimpse with you is equivalent to an hour's study with an ordinary man."

"You compliment me too highly."

"Not at all. Now, I want you to say, from all that you can think and conjecture at the present moment, whether or not you consider that man a fit man to pay court to my daughter, and receive my paternal countenance in so doing."

The detective was in the quandary which he had hoped to escape.

His temporary promise to "Montalbert" engaged him to a strict neutrality ("hands-off") in the premises for the time being; while his subsequent convention with his wife just as indubitably prompted him to let the truth be known as to the adventurer's true character forthwith.

Nothing was left him but to be absolutely non-committal.

"You are really asking too much of me, Mr. Goldkirk," he replied, with a look of annoyance.

"Assuming that my acquaintance even with the gentleman's personal appearance is almost nil, you can't expect an intelligent reply to your query. I must have time, especially in such a case as this."

The banker gave another sigh, this time an unmistakable one.

Unworthy as he might be, there was no doubting his idolization of his child, or the sincerity of his anxiety for her future.

"I suppose you are right," he said. "But you will really find out about the man for me, and at your earliest?"

"I shall do so."

"That is all, then, for the present, I believe, Crimmins. I shall look for your report as to that other matter to-morrow evening."

"Here?"

"Why not? It won't matter now, since there is no longer any dissimulation between us. Will you," with a smile, "rejoin my innocent form of relaxation?"

"No, thanks. This door, I perceive, leads directly into the hall. Good-night, Mr. Goldkirk."

As the detective stepped upon the elevator, without deigning any response to the grinning look of inquiry on the part of the colored colossus, there was a fresh and more uproarious burst of music and approbation from behind the folding-doors, as an indication that the Mr. Hyde part of the Goldkirk duality had rejoined his satellites with fresh zest and fervor.

CHAPTER XVIII.

PROS AND CONS.

RETURNING home before midnight, to find Luella dutifully sitting up for him, Old Grip lost no time in describing his visit to her.

"It seems to have been your day for surprises," was the young wife's first thoughtful comment upon what he had to tell. "But, of course, you can take no real stock in this gushing and extraordinary change of tactics on the part of the bank president?"

"Not much."

"I might have known that. That man is as deep as he is dangerous—and foul. His ordinary hypocrisy was just wasted upon you—he saw that at last; so he merely replaced it with this seeming devil-may-care candor as his next best game. Not a bad idea either; and I confess that I have a higher notion of his cleverness than before."

"That is just the way I look at it. Besides, in this new aspect he is much more agreeable and companionable than before."

"And yet the shamelessness of this man's secret excesses! It is absolutely revolting."

"My dear, we have read and admired Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson's fantastic novel together."

"Oh, I know, I know! Mr. Hyde and Dr. Jekyll! But an orgie such as this?"

"My dear wife, Goldkirk's case is not an isolated one, among our so-called magnates."

"No matter. What do you suppose is Goldkirk's real object in these new tactics?"

"Haven't an idea as yet, and can only be generally on my guard, though I suspect some fresh design against the Markhams."

"Just my inference. And you will go up in Westchester in search of them to-morrow?"

"Certainly."

"With me?"

"That depends."

"Indeed! and what does it particularly depend on?"

"Well, perhaps on nothing so very particular. I suppose you can go along, you inquisitor!"

"You dear old boy!"

"Of course!"

"And what about this Montalbert?"

"Well, it is possible that I may get a new wrinkle or two with regard to him from the Markhams."

"Ah! very likely."

"Though it is probable I shall seek that promised interview with him at his den to-morrow night."

"Ah! his den? Heaven grant it may not be an imitation of Mr. Bank President Goldkirk's!"

"Why?"

"Well," with a laugh, "I don't know about trusting you in that sort of company as a steady thing."

"The deuce! as if you weren't time and again familiar with men's spurring-habits—and some women's, too, for that matter, in our old circus days! when, if the truth were told, I might have first fallen in love with your bewitching shape in that tiger-taming jungle act of yours."

Blushing as ruddily as in their honeymoon period, Luella's hand over his lips nipped the reminiscence in the bud.

"Well, well," continued Old Grip, apologetically, "perhaps we might as well go to bed at once, to save further discussion, if the sun is not destined to rise on an unfinished dispute."

And to bed they accordingly went.

At the early breakfast next morning Old Grip surprised Master Cheese-it by appearing in his countryman's disguise, in which he had resolved to seek the contemplated interview with Maud Markham—and with her husband also, if practicable—in Luella's company.

He explained the situation, and then said:

"By the way, Cheese-it, perhaps there is no use in your keeping up your face of an employment at the Itna Steam Laundry any more, though it may be that you are the best judge of that."

"What's the matter with the trick, boss?" Cheese-it asked, in no little surprise.

The detective then hurriedly described Montalbert's visit and disclosures, adding:

"You perceive that by this time, if not much earlier than now, that sharp-eyed forewoman, Mrs. Griscom, must be as thoroughly conversant with our identity as Montalbert, or Moresby, himself."

"I don't know about that, boss," said the boy, thoughtfully scratching his head as he finished his last cup of coffee. "If she had tumbled to it already, she would have fired me in short order. Don't you think so?"

"Not necessarily. That Montalbert-Moresby would have lost no time in informing her of the trick after his discovery of it—on the very evening of our acting it, according to his own declaration, which I see no reason to doubt—would seem most probable. Then she might have her own reasons for hoodwinking us into the belief that she had no suspicion of our double-acting."

Cheese-it nodded, and then he looked up brightly.

"Would she, though, boss," he exclaimed, "after learning of Montalbert's self-exposure to you? That, you know, would render even their further duplicity in the matter of no more avail."

"True, true!" admitted the detective, frowning.

Luella laughed.

"The complication is becoming a regular intricacy of wheels within wheels," she cried. "Perhaps, Edward, Cheese-it had better continue on at the laundry, for to-day at least, just as if he, at all events, were none the wiser for all these things. Something might come of it, you know."

It was accordingly so decided, and, shortly after the boy had set out for his new employment, Nelly was left in charge of the flat, while Crimmins and his wife started for the Grand Central Depot.

Luella, who was always a tasteful and stylish dresser, could not help feeling somewhat embarrassed by the striking contrast she afforded on the street to her husband in his bayseed character.

"You'll probably be taken for my country cousin—and very country at that," she said, laughing.

"And why not for your country grandfather?" suggested Old Grip, gravely.

"Well, I shan't appear ashamed of you, at all events. So don't be worried on that score."

"Oh, I'm not worrying at all! Hayseeds never do—except perhaps when they fall afoul of the police, or the bunco steers. But, don't

forget that I'm just your 'Tummas'—plain Thomas Cook—for the time being."

"I'll try to remember. What will Mrs. Maud Markham think of the contrast I present to you? That is what troubles me the most."

"It needn't at all. It will probably be but a few minutes—though that will depend on circumstances—before I shall have occasion to declare my true character to her. Then all will be plain."

"Why should you not have come without any disguise whatever, then?"

"To set her to flight at the first glimpse of me, perchance?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Besides, do you forget that, in Mrs. Markham's estimation, I am still somewhere in the depths of that bottomless pit of the mountain gorge, into which the Wild Shoemaker of Whippoorwill was so certain he had hurled me headlong?"

"Ah! I had forgotten that," with a reminiscent little shudder.

"Why did you buy tickets for Pleasantville?" she presently asked when they had taken seats in the train.

"It is but two miles this side of Chappaqua, the nearer station for the Whippoorwill region," he explained. "But I made some village acquaintances there while playing milk-hand for the old cow-farmer back in the hills, whom it might not be altogether convenient to meet with such a dashing companion as yourself."

"Oh!"

Arriving at Pleasantville, a village thirty miles northward, which does not belie its name, a serviceable equipage was obtained at the livery-stable, and they set out on their drive to the haunted farm-house, four or five miles back in the wild and picturesque country to the northeast.

The greater part of the drive was over good roads, and very agreeable.

A touch or two of frost had hastened the rich October tints of the woods, the air was bracing without being cold, and the farms which they passed, thrifty-looking and well-kept for the most part, were pleasant to look upon.

But, after turning up into the rugged, up-and-down, break-neck Whippoorwill road, the case was considerably different.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Luella, at last, after being tossed now against her husband, and then against her side of the buggy-bars, with many a twist and jerk. "What abominable roads for such a short distance from New York City!"

"A standing shame to the communities contenting themselves with the like!" assented Old Grip; "but it will soon be over; we are not far from our destination now."

The Haunted House had just come in sight when Luella uttered a startled exclamation as a wild and curious figure suddenly stepped out from a wayside thicket and curiously regarded them.

CHAPTER XIX.

MAUDE MARKHAM.

"Don't be alarmed," cautioned Old Grip, in a low voice. "It is only the Wild Shoemaker of Whippoorwill."

Nevertheless, there was something so formidable and uncanny in the hermit's personality that Luella could but gaze at him with something of a shudder, and yet not without a certain fascination.

In his former sojourn in the neighborhood the detective had encountered the strange recluse several times (to say nothing of his memorable encounter with him in his true detective character) though without taking the trouble to accost him.

But now so strangely earnest and eager seemed the man's attitude that it occurred to him to address some words to him, and he pulled up with that intention, at which act the Hermit suddenly recoiled a pace or two, waving his hands wildly, and with his eyes riveted burningly upon the pretended countryman's face.

"Back, back to the shadows!" he cried, hoarsely. "It is not permitted. Back, back to your shadows, I say!"

The detective at once burst into a loud "Haw, haw!"

"What you talkin' 'bout, Moses?" he demanded, in his broad rustic accent. "Back to my shadders, eh? Why, I ain't got no shadders to go back to as I knows on. Come, Moses, be reasonable and civil, can't ye? What d'ye carry that 'ere long three-pronged stick fur, fur instance? and what you got in that old hand-bag?"

Something like a troubled doubt seemed to come into the strange man's weird face, though its first dread or suspiciousness still remained there.

Still hardly diverting the direction of his startled gaze, he thrust a hand into a large canvas bag or haversack at his side, and produced therefrom snake after snake, singly and by the handful.

The reptiles were, moreover, alive and writhing, though apparently harmless.

Luella was still too much of a circus woman to be more than moderately horrified by the spectacle, which was nevertheless neither agreeable nor edifying.

"Do drive on!" she whispered to her husband. "Remember your former encounter with this crazy giant. Besides, there is a woman—probably Mrs. Markham herself—observing us from one of the windows of the old house yonder."

"In a moment! in a moment!" he replied. "I want merely to see what the queer old codger here is driving at."

The Hermit had thrust back the snakes into the sack, and was menacingly waving toward the detective the long forked stick with which it was his practice to pin them by the neck to the rocks while extracting their poisonous fangs.

"Back!" he hoarsely cried again; "back to your shadows! The dead are dead, and, if not of the elect, eternally damned are they! Thus it is written. Back to your shadows, back to your fire-crypt, back to your yawning gulf!"

"Oho!" muttered Old Grip, now beginning to understand; "why didn't I think of it at first?"

The Wild Shoemaker suddenly produced his stencils and marking materials.

A huge flat-faced rock, jutting out of the woods close at hand, presented its broadside to the road.

Upon it he swiftly stenciled the injunction, "REPENT OR BE DAMNED!" after which, with a parting gesticulation of his long, ape-like arms, he plunged into the wood and disappeared.

"What was it you hadn't thought of at first?" asked Luella, as her husband started up the horse.

"The old fellow's significance in ordering me back to the shadows, and all that rot."

"What was his significance?"

"Don't you see? He doubtless penetrated my disguise with a first glance of those crazy but shrewd old eyes of his, and couldn't understand my not still being in the gorge-pit into which he was so certain he had flung me."

"Oh, indeed! But what an utterly forlorn-looking old place!" for they had now drawn up before the Haunted House.

The door opened almost immediately, and Mrs. Markham made her appearance.

She approached the wagon, looking much as upon the former occasion, very shabby in her cheap, dark dress, but without the shawl about her head and face, whose striking brunette beauty was thus made apparent at once.

She nodded toward the pretended countryman, but looked curiously askance at his handsome and fashionably-attired companion, while Luella was naturally more or less embarrassed.

"Glad you recognize me, ma'am," said the detective, with his broadest and most countrified grin. "I'm Thomas Cook, you know, what tuk the letter fur you? Got the money fur it, too—more even than you promised. Haw, haw, haw! This leddy is a friend of mine, ma'am. An' I've got a bang-up message for you into the bargain, ma'am. Any place whar a feller whose eddycation's been neglected c'd tie up fur a bit?"

Maud pointed to the weed-grown driveway and the ramshackle barn at its upper end, and then Luella alighted, while her husband drove up to stable his horse.

The two beautiful women, perfect strangers to each other up to this moment, stood there mutely exchanging looks.

Then something in the sweet but grief-worn dark face of the house-dweller seemed to draw Luella like a magnet, and, going straight up to her with moistened eyes, she kissed her.

"Who are you?" asked Maud, her face softening, yet retaining something of its suspicious, wary look.

"Dear madam!" replied Luella, impulsively; "I am merely one who would like to be your friend."

"But a lady, so lovely, so fashionable, and in company with that coarse-grained hobbledohoy! I can't understand."

Luella flushed a little and then smiled at hearing her disguised husband thus uncomplimentarily characterized.

"You sha'n't be mystified long," she replied, laughing. "Mayn't I go into the house with you?"

The smile and laugh seemed to have finally dissipated Maud's apprehensions, for she smiled in return, and then, with a gesture, turned with her companion toward the house.

"It is a poor enough place to offer the hospitality of," she said, when they had entered a large, low-ceiled front room whose furniture was extremely old-fashioned and plain, though still substantial. "But I was born here, as were my father and several of his forefathers before him, which makes it still somewhat homelike to me, miserably ruinous as it is. May I ask you to take off your things?"

Luella accepted the invitation, not very heartily urged, and at this juncture "Thomas Cook" rejoined them.

"Dear, dear!" he exclaimed, standing in the middle of the floor, but in hand, gripsack at his feet, and taking in his surroundings with gaping interest. "An' so I'm inside this house at last. Who'd 'a' thunk it? Is it really haunted, ma'am?" lowering his voice.

"You delivered my letter, then?" demanded Mrs. Markham, a little impatiently.

"Oh, yes! um! that was all right."

And the pretended countryman went on to recount the affair at no little length.

"You spoke of having a message for me!" at last interrupted the young woman, even more peremptorily than before.

"Yes, sirree!" cried "Thomas Cook," suddenly eying her with a changing look. "That's the password, ma'am. A message, you kin bet!"

"Who is it from?"

"From a man whom you have doubtless little reason to like, and much to fear, madam."

She started, dismayed at the unexpected change in his tone and bearing.

"From whom do you bring me a message?" she exclaimed.

"From—Mr. Bank President Goldkirk!"

The young woman recoiled, glaring at him. Then her amazement was completed by his suddenly divesting himself of his rustic habiliments, and standing forth in his true character.

Maud's startled look, however, was quickly replaced by a stern and menacing one, and she even made a slight movement as if to produce a weapon.

"So, I have been tricked from the first!" she said, haughtily.

"Mrs. Markham, it is true," replied the detective, earnestly. "But I am here now in my own character as your friend."

A disdainful gesture.

"Who and what are you?"

"Edward Crimmins, otherwise Old Grip, the Detective."

A furiously resentful look partly gave way to one of doubt and wonder.

"It cannot be!" she faltered. "That man—that accursed, heartless sleuth-hound was hurled into the bottomless pit of the Devil's Gorge only day before yesterday by my eccentric brother."

Old Grip briefly explained his escape in that instance.

"Who and what is this lady?" was the bewildered woman's next query.

Luella sympathetically threw her arms about her and answered for herself.

CHAPTER XX.

MAKING FRIENDS.

"DEAR Madam!" exclaimed the detective's beautiful consort, earnestly; "this man, whom you so little understand, is my husband, and he has brought me with him to this place that I may help him to become your friend—your friend in need, no less than the friend of your fugitive and innocent husband, Claude Markham."

"Is it true, ma'am," supplemented Old Grip, in the voice and manner which he knew so well how to render sympathetic and gentle.

But Maud Markham could not or would not understand just yet.

"It cannot be—it is impossible!" she exclaimed. "Old Grip—the remorseless sleuth-hound of the law—he who has vaunted that he would be my fugitive husband's Nemesis—you? It cannot be that you would become our friend!"

"Be seated, ma'am," interposed the detective, kindly, "and I think I can convince you of your error, though it will be something of a long story." He set out for her, as he spoke, one of the old time high-backed chairs, while standing in readiness to occupy another himself when she should deign to be seated. "And as to that Nemesis business, you haven't got it very exact," smilingly. "It was as the bank robbers' Nemesis that I vaunted I should become—certainly not that of an unfortunate fugitive of whose innocence of crime I am no less convinced than yourself."

The last words, together with their unmistakable sincerity of utterance, were not without their effect.

"You—you are sure that—that I can trust you?" Maud faltered.

"Oh, Mrs. Markham, I know you can!" cried out Luella. "I will answer for my husband's truth and honor!"

Maud sunk into the proffered chair without further hesitation.

Then and there, and with a graphic eloquence that was peculiarly his own, Old Grip poured out for her information the entire history of his connection with the case from the beginning to the end.

It was some moments after he had finished before Maud seemed to thoroughly digest the complicated disclosures of the strange story, and then she said:

"All this is very unexpected and not a little bewildering to me, as a matter of course. Of this, though, I am morally, absolutely certain: Mr. Clifford Goldkirk is just as much of a villain as ever, in spite of what he may now profess, and he will never be anything else."

"I agree with you perfectly," cried the detective, "and so does my wife."

"And now I understand, you come to me from him with a proposal for the return of those letters?"

"That is what he thinks I am here for."

"Well, we will assume the *bona fide* nature

of your messengership, Mr. Crimmins. In this assumption, what then is it the scoundrel would propose?"

"He doesn't make any proposition," with a smile. "He leaves that to you."

"Ah, indeed!"

"Yes; he commissions me to offer on his part any guarantee that shall be demanded by Mr. Claude Markham and yourself."

"Guarantees!" bitterly. "And what dependence, sir, would you place on any that such a man might make?"

"Not a cent's worth," promptly. "And yet there would be a way to test his sincerity to the full—to put the touchstone to his faith, as Shakespeare has it."

"What way?"

"By touching his pocketbook," with his characteristic bluntness—"bleeding him outright, and to the tune of thousands."

Maud Markham's black eyes flashed.

"Thank you!" she said, ironically. "We are poor, but we are not blackmailers."

"It isn't blackmail—nothing could make it so!" cried the detective, earnestly. "Why, the letters were yours before he stole them first—are still your own property, no matter by what means you might have become repossessed of them!"

"That is true," with less severity.

"The man would be justly in your power," continued Old Grip, still more urgently. "If he is in your power again, after once wriggling out of it by the basest and meanest of felonies, so much the worse for him! What misery and degradation has not the cowardly hound heaped upon you and yours! Pay him back in his own coin—or, still better, in simple, justifiable reprisal—and bleed him to the quick! Thousands, did I say? It should be worth tens of thousands to you!"

His sympathetic vehemence had apparently banished the last vestige of her reproval, but she still shook her head.

"Such spiteful and mercenary men as Goldkirk," the detective went on, "can only be wounded in their pocketbooks. It is almost their sole vulnerable point. In any sort of fight with them, you must stab them there, as you would stab a worthier foe in the corporeal vitals, or in his honor, or his prospects. Demand first a written and attested guarantee that the man does not, cannot, and never has meant to believe your husband guilty of a single dishonest or unworthy act. Then say in addition—this is merely an off-hand suggestion:—'Fifty thousand dollars for the return of the letters. Otherwise, publication of their contents within a week.' Or you can leave off the threatening alternative, if you choose. But it would be my advice to let him have it hot-shot, and in the bull's-eye."

"That is it!" cried Luella, enthusiastically.

"Mrs. Markham, all the fairness and honesty in the world would back you in such a course. None better could be advised."

Maud Markham turned, with a grave smile, to the beautiful blonde speaker, whose face and manner were so prettily animated.

"Putting yourself in my place, Mrs. Crimmins," she abruptly asked, "is it a course that you would adopt?"

"Unhesitatingly!" was the prompt reply.

Then Maud looked at them both with a half-comical expression.

"I begin to feel," she said, interrogatively, "that I can trust you—implicitly!"

Their frank answering looks were a sufficient assent to the query.

"All this talk," continued Maud, "of bargaining with me or my husband for the return of those stolen papers, is just so much thrown away."

"Why?"

"Simply because they are not in our possession, and we don't know where they are."

Then Luella's countenance fell, while Old Grip burst into a laugh.

"True," said he. "In pleading the banker's theory I lost sight of that."

"What!" said Mrs. Markham, "you did not believe us to have them?"

"Certainly not; I have contended with him to the contrary all along. Besides, have you so soon forgotten my interview with Moresby-Montalbert, as I recounted it to you?"

"Ah, yes; of course," and Maud's face resumed its troubled look. "And Mr. Moresby assured you that he could obtain those letters when he chose?"

"Not quite; but that he could lay his hand at will on the bank-robber, who presumably has them in his possession."

"Much the same thing! Then," confidently, "he will obtain them for us."

"I doubt it. You seem, indeed, Mrs. Markham, to have a belief in this adventurer's unselfishness that I altogether fail to comprehend."

"It is very remarkable to me, too," interposed Luella.

"Listen, my friends," said Mrs. Markham, after a long pause. "Much as I knew, or thought I knew, about that strange being, Moresby, or by whatever name he may choose to be known, what you have told me of his self-declared evil character and antecedent troubles

me greatly, and will trouble and bewilder poor Claude even more than me."

"Bad and unprincipled, in a general way, as we may have suspected him of being, he has been our steadfast friend in misfortune, our adviser, our good genius, as we might say."

"But for him, my husband—but," with a pained look, "I cannot go into Claude's faults and madneses and temptations with you."

"I will merely say this that he has been finally rescued out of them almost wholly—perhaps apart from such wifely influence as I may have been able to exert to the same end—through that man's brotherly or fatherly counsel, assistance and support. I—well, I don't know what more to say, and I sha'n't try."

"Do not," said Old Grip, gently. "But let me suggest one thing. Were it not better for me to know your husband personally, and for him to participate in this interview?"

Maud seemed to hesitate—as if with the returning phantom of her long-nourished vigilance and caution—and then she rose abruptly.

"Yes," she said; "I shall trust you in all, or nothing. Wait here, please."

She quitted the room, and from a side window in the room they could see her approach the foot of the crag toward the rear of the house-grounds, with a swift but cautious step and a manner watchful and alert.

Then she suddenly raised her voice in a wild and melodious cry, something like the *jodel* of the Tyrolean mountaineers, which went echoing and reechoing among rocks and crannies of the wooded high, further and further away, until gradually lost in the remoteness.

To Luella, especially, who was very fond of poetry, the musical, full-toned cry and its flying echoes were very suggestive.

At all events, she found herself repeating in a rapt undertone the two opening stanzas of Tennyson's famous "Bugle Song:"

"Oh, hark, oh, hear! how thin and clear,
And thinner, clearer, further going!
Oh, sweet and far from cliff and scar
The horns of Elfland faintly blowing!
Below, let us hear the purple glens replying:
Blow, bugle! answer, echoes, dying, dying, dying!"

"Oh, love, they die in yon rich sky,
They faint on hill or field or river;
Our echoes roll from soul to soul,
And grow forever and forever.
Blow, bugle, blow! set the wild echoes flying,
And answer, echoes, answer, dying, dying, dying!"

Scarcely, however, had the woman's *jodel* cry died away, before there was a human response from somewhere far up among the crags.

Then a gigantic but active figure made its appearance, springing down the rugged path, and a moment later the Wild Shoemaker of Whippoorwill was at her side.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FUGITIVE.

As the Hermit came to a submissive pause before his sister he, seemingly without opening his lips, emitted several sharp sounds that were in exact imitation of the cry of the whippoorwill, or great American goat-sucker, when suddenly swooping groundward in its evening beetle quest.

Maud seemed to be giving him some directions, which he interrupted with strange gesticulations, apparently in astonishment or protest.

Then, with a final bird-call, he dashed back up the path with a loping ease and speed suggestive of the phantasmagoric monster in Lady Shelley's weird novel of *Frankenstein*, and quickly disappeared among the wild rocks.

"What an extraordinary creature!" said Luella. "But what are you doing, or trying to do, Edward?"

The latter was essaying a series of gulping, scarcely audible sounds behind his tightly-compressed lips.

"Nothing much—only trying to catch that whippoorwill trick of the Hermit's," he vouchsafed to open his lips long enough to answer. "There!" with a fresh attempt; I almost caught it that time. But I'll succeed yet."

"What for?" laughing.

"Oh!" desisting altogether at last, with an echo of her laugh; "everything is worth knowing, my dear; and something tells me that I may yet have some more private dealings with that same Wild Shoemaker."

"Not again in the neighborhood of the Devil's Gorge, or any other 'bottomless pit,' I hope."

"Catch a bird twice with the same pinch of salt for his tail! I'll look out for that, little woman."

"What is the man's real name?"

"Moses Crust!"

"Crust! Then he is really Mrs. Markham's brother?"

"Or half-brother, or something of the sort. There is some sort of romance, I believe, in the lady's earlier life and antecedents. What do you think of her?"

"I like her greatly, and feel that I might come to love her. But see; her fugitive must be near at hand."

Maud, who had remained patiently at the foot of the crag, was observed to look up expectantly along the path.

Presently a roughly-attired but gracefully-appearing young man came slowly down the mountain, casting suspiciously-inquiring looks toward the old house.

The discussion, however, between fugitive husband and devoted wife was but brief before they entered together.

"Mr. Crimmins," said Claude Markham, very gravely, while taking the detective's heartily extended hand, after bowing profoundly to Luella, "the possibility of this friendly meeting with you could never have occurred to me until now. Your reputation had gone before you, and I had depicted you in my imagination as a species of professional monster—something like the proverbial Blueskin or Victor Hugo's Javert."

He was a singularly handsome young man, with a refined face, already betraying in its worn and hunted look the life of concealment and suspense which he had been leading, but also with a suggestion of weakness or irresolution in some of its lineaments.

The detective smiled engagingly.

"Let me hope," said he, "that you will find the reality less black than the picture of your imagination."

Then, the more readily to set the young man at his ease without delay, he briefly recounted his varied story, as he had already done to the wife.

Before he had quite finished, Maud arose, with a housewifely look, and said she would have to betake herself to the kitchen for some little time.

"I know what you are going to do!" cried Luella, starting up with her bright smile. "You are thinking of the wants of our inner man and inner woman as the noon hour approaches."

"Well, what if I am?" said Maud, slightly blushing. "It is true I shall have but frugal fare to offer, but—"

"But you shall offer nothing at all, unless I assist you in preparing it. Come, now, my dear, I will not take no for an answer."

And, linking her arm in that of the proprietress of the Haunted House, Luella accompanied her into the kitchen.

A good fire was already at hand, and it turned out that Maud's larder was much better supplied than might have been anticipated.

The cellar store-room contained a fairly ample supply of provisions, though in no great variety, and there was a little spring-house near at hand, with fresh milk and sweet new-made butter and pot-cheese in abundance; for, in addition to a pony and chaise in the dilapidated barn, there was a good cow contentedly chewing her cud in a little pasture-lot adjoining, which had not yet attracted the attention of the visitors.

"And yet they call this the Haunted House!" cried Luella, when she had made these discoveries, and was busying herself with the young hostess in the preparation of a substantial repast. "Why, in spite of its tumble-down-tiveness, I think it is just a grand, lovely old place!"

"You really think so?" said Maud, with a pleased look.

"Indeed, I do! Why do they call it haunted?"

"Because it is lonely—and deserted, I suppose. What temporarily abandoned place won't have an uncanny reputation among these country boobies? Haunted? Yes," with a loving glance around, "with dear and sweet old memories. But that is all."

"How I should like to know something of your early history," said Luella, a little shyly.

"You would find it prosaic enough, I am afraid."

"I am sure there would be romance in it for me, at least. There is plenty in mine, for that matter, and much that might even challenge your credulity."

Maud looked up from her employment with a flush of curiosity.

"Ah?" inquiringly; "but then you were connected with the stage, or something of that sort?"

"With the show business."

And then Luella forthwith, in a graphic and highly entertaining way, gave her companion a brief running sketch of her picturesque ante-marriage life and career, as they have been familiarized to the reader of this series in the "Showman Detective."

"What a life, what a career, and what a wooing!" was Mrs. Markham's commentary.

"Dear friend, it seems all but incredible. I am afraid my own little history must appear uneventful and colorless, indeed, in the light of such a comparison."

"Your turn, anyway," cried the detective's wife, laughing. "So come now, and do not keep me waiting for what I have been anghing for from the very start."

"I was born here in this old house," Mrs. Markham straightway began. "My father was a sailor—a sea-captain at the last—who was lost at sea before my birth. My mother's death followed within a year—very likely of a broken heart."

"I became the charge of my father's parents, for this old place had been his family homestead from the Indian-fighting days."

"Dear, good old couple! how they loved me,

and with what willing tenderness they assumed my rearing and education, as had been done with my half-brother before me!

"He was so many years older than I that I can only remember him as a grown man. You see, my father was middle-aged at the time of his marriage with my mother, who was barely in her twenties; and Moses was the issue of a former marriage.

"My grandparents were fairly well-to-do farm folks, their farm having originally included several hundred acres of the finest land hereabouts.

"But my coming among them seemed to bring ill-fortune with it. At all events, the bad luck came.

"When I was still a mere child, my grandfather's only near relative, a younger brother in commercial ventures in New York, succumbed to business disaster, failing for a heavy amount, and wound up a series of misfortunes by taking his own life."

CHAPTER XXII.

A SIMPLE, SAD HISTORY.

"His brother's sad fate," continued Mrs. Markham, "was a blow to my poor grandfather, Ichabod Crust, in more ways than one.

"He had indorsed the suicide's business paper to such a great amount that the meeting of the liability swept away the greater and best part of the farm-lands.

"Little or nothing was left but this old house and the thirty or forty all but barren acres along the foot of these wild crags and up among the crags themselves.

"However, he had still managed to secure some of his savings, and these the old couple determined to devote exclusively to my education, in order that I might have a chance in the world when they were gone.

"How they must have stunted and slaved to make the wretched remnants of the farm supply their needs to this end!

"Though but little more than twelve years old at the time of this change in our fortunes, I well recall my gradual appreciation of the hardness of it all, without thoroughly understanding it.

"And this is an illustration of the thoughtlessness of youth, which may so often be mistaken for heartlessness or ingratitude.

"In order to conceal the truth from me, my poor grandparents actually cultivated a reputation for miserliness, which gradually became the impression of the entire community.

"You see, we were Quakers from 'way back. Such is the prevailing characteristic of farm-people of that sect for solid and painstaking thrift, no less than for honesty, that, notwithstanding the misfortune that had overtaken my grandfather, he was still supposed to have laid away savings to a great amount; and now his meager, pinched change of living was come to be deemed a sign of hoarding for the mere hoarding's sake.

"Was it strange that I shared a false impression that was shared by so many, and which, as I have said, the poor old couple were even glad to make appear so, and solely for my sake?

"Perhaps not, but now, when their pardonable deception—their heroic self-abnegation—stands before me in its true, absolutely self-immolating light—I am hardly ever able to look reflectively around me in these old rooms without the tears rushing to my eyes, a sense of remorse and sorrow to my heart.

"But, of course, I could not know then, but continued going to school in the vicinity, while mentally deploring, if not reprobating, the crabbed miserliness that seemed to have suddenly possessed the kind, good hearts, or flushing with shame or anger as my rude school-associates might chance to taunt me with it in that brutal thoughtlessness which is no less common among girls than boys.

"At last I was packed off to an expensive and fashionable boarding-school—or Young Ladies' College, as it had already grown the custom to designate such institutions.

"But then that is the general American way from beginning to end—to magnify everything out of sense and reason. We sell town-lots before there are towns, our villages are often 'cities,' our shops 'emporiums,' our boarding-schools 'seminaries' or 'academies,' and we no longer lend or borrow money, but 'negotiate a loan.'

"I was fourteen when I went to 'college,' somewhat marveling at the expensiveness of the school selected, no less than at the really nice wardrobe that was managed to be provided for me out of my grandparents' stinginess, as I supposed; though, nevertheless, I loved them dearly in my thoughtless way, and, if not altogether appreciating their tearful eyes and lip-tremors at our first parting, it was a sad wrench to my better nature to have to leave them, much as I had always longed to see something of the great bright world beyond our wild rock-valleys, and have an opportunity to strike out for myself.

"I was eighteen when I finally returned to them, with my course finished, and no doubt duly polished and improved perhaps to the full extent that my coarse nature was capable of.

"But the mask of loving hypocrisy could no

longer be retained, and a fresh misfortune had come upon the homestead during my last year of absence.

"Moses, my half-brother, whom I had always vaguely understood to be somewhat eccentric, though very talented, had returned abruptly from a long series of mysterious wanderings in a condition little better than that of the harmlessly insane.

"He had taken his degree as a theological graduate at Andover years before, and had then disappeared, after a violent quarrel with the professors, by reason, I believe, of his erratic interpretation of the Scriptures, which he had come to know almost by heart, but for no other purpose, it would seem, than to distort their meanings as viewed through the crooked lenses of his clouded understanding.

"After that, he had wandered over the country, no one could tell exactly how or whither. It was rumored, however, that it was mostly as a wayside preacher, and that he had by turns affiliated with the Oneida Community, with the Ohio Shakers, and perhaps with the Mormons, too, for that matter, though he could never have been other than a rigidly moral man, and he is so to this day.

"But there he was back upon the poor old folks again, after a more or less continuous absence of more than twenty years, a middle-aged fanatic, little better than a tramp, and apparently with no means or intention of earning a living.

"Still, his craze for snake-catching and quotation-stenciling was already developed, often taking him away from home for many days at a time, and somehow or another he at once manifested a strangely servile and engrossing affection, or brotherliness, for me.

"But I was too troubled to much care at the time whether he came or went, or what became of him.

"The secret of the poor old folks' poverty was at last before me. The last penny of their life's savings had been expended upon my education, and, though they still had the remnant of the farm, they were too feeble to work the miserable land any longer to advantage, and too poor to hire the necessary help to that end.

"I did not waste my time in useless self-reproaches, but set myself at once to the task of securing work, with the intention of contributing to the comfort of their remaining honorable and forlorn years.

"Through the interest of several of my former school-friends, I was soon so fortunate as to obtain a fairly-paying situation as governess with a wealthy and amiable family in Peekskill.

"For two years thereafter I worked like a slave. By persevering application in such scant leisure hours as were afforded me, I developed something of a literary talent in the way of juvenile story-writing. Some of my sketches were accepted by the periodicals and liberally paid for. I kept at it, and at the end of those two years was earning three or four hundred dollars per annum in this way, in addition to my wages as governess, which amounted to three hundred more.

"Everything beyond my actual expenses went to the dear, good old couple at home, and it was the joy of my life, notwithstanding the hard work and close, wearing application that it cost me, to know that I was really supplying them with some restoration of the ease and comfort which they had so long and with such secret, pathetic heroism foregone for my unworthy sake.

"Still," passionately, and with the tears springing into her beautiful eyes, "what was it as a return? A bagatelle, a pitiful, contemptible, tardy amends, and they already each with a foot in the grave!"

Luella abruptly dropped the kitchen work immediately in hand, and crossing the floor, put her arms gently about the narrator's neck and kissed her.

"Nothing of the sort!" she exclaimed. "Now, my dear—Maud, you have been doing nothing but belittling and depreciating yourself steadily throughout this entire narrative. You are altogether unjust to yourself, and I want no more of it, or I shall positively have to decline hearing you further, interesting as your story is in itself, or—to sit upon you forthwith!"

"Ah, but the thought of it even now!" murmured Maud. "It tortures me, my friend. Every old familiar object in these surroundings seems to accuse me of heartlessness."

"Nonsense! as if you could have known, or could have been to blame, even had it been otherwise! Your conscience is altogether oversensitive. Now go on with your sad story, like a good little brave and devoted woman, as you are."

CHAPTER XXIII.

TAKING COUNSEL.

"THERE remains but little more to tell of my humble story," resumed Maud, at last. "Misfortune suddenly came heaping upon me toward the end of the second year of my Peekskill employment.

"In the first place, a message came saying that my poor grandfather was suddenly stricken

down by a paralytic stroke. He was over ninety, and could scarcely be expected to long survive the shock.

"I arrived home to find that he had already breathed his last, while poor grandma was helpless in an adjoining room, from a similar stroke on her own part, doubtless hastened by the grief-shock upon her age-enfeebled frame.

"In a few hours she breathed her last in my arms. As they had lived together in that which seems, so had they passed away, undivided to the last, unto that which is—the life which is real in the eternities. And, in addition to being orphaned, I was alone on earth.

"In this bitter hour, when I was kneeling beside my dead, a harsh exclamation that was almost a laugh jarred upon my ear.

"It was from Moses, who had returned from the retreat or cave-den which he had already made for himself somewhere up amid the rocky and woody heights.

"I sprang to my feet and, forgetful of his mental infirmity, turned upon him in a fury.

"While a kind neighbor or two had ministered to the sufferers before my arrival, he had skulked and roamed uselessly about the place, shouting forth his hideous aphorisms, and stenciling his ominous texts over the fences, the barn-door, the back-stop, and even on the walls of the rooms themselves, to the fright of the watchers and perhaps the terror of the dying.

"In my rage—for at the time we were alone with the dead—I heaped reproaches upon him. It was a tongue-lashing, as it is not inaptly called, that I could not have been guilty of in my cooler, less bitter moments.

"He listened as if stunned at first. Then, with a wild gesture, together with a jumble of confused texts, he rushed away, crying out that he would never enter the house again.

"He has kept his word, for which I am not altogether sorry; though I shall never cease to compassionate the man.

"He was not even present at the double funeral, which speedily followed.

"But a few days thereafter, when, after disposing of the live-stock and farming-tools for a mere song, when I was sorrowfully closing up the old house, preparatory to leaving it practically forever—for it was not a place that could be rented for more than a pittance—he reappeared there in the back yard, so contrite and humbled that my heart went out to his forlornness afresh.

"I spoke kindly, telling him what had been done. By my grandfather's will, the old place had been bequeathed to me, with the simple injunction that I would charge myself with his (Moses's) welfare to the best of my ability. There had been no personalty to speak of, even the funeral expenses having been borne out of the few dollars I had been laboriously saving for a double birthday present to those who had been called away. For by a strange coincidence their birthdays were the same, though my grandfather had been some few years the elder. All this I tried to explain to my unfortunate half-brother, and probably to his sufficient comprehension, adding that the place should continue as his home, if he chose to make it such.

"No. He was becomingly grateful, but he would not again sleep under a human roof. He would, however, consider the surrounding rocks and woods—God's undefiled temples, as he called them—his abiding-place; and if I were ever in trouble or despair I must come to him, when his prayers and divine inspirations should stand me in good stead. Then he uttered a torrent of disconnected texts, seized my hand, kissed it, and was gone.

"There is little more to tell. My pupil at the Peekskill house had died suddenly of diphtheria, and her bereaved parents were about to start for Europe.

"After that I filled the thankless position of governess in several New York City situations, till at last engaged by that infatuated man, Mr. Goldkirk, for his young daughter.

"I find that you are already aware of my miserable experiences in that man's employment.

"When this last trouble came upon us, necessitating Claude's flight and concealment, I remembered Moses's parting injunction, and we came here. Moses has done well by us. Through his assistance my husband had been occupying a cranny far away up yonder in the heights where I am sure the most diligent search would never have unearthed him. I renovated the old house, secured a horse and cow at a bargain, and, while keeping my secret to the best of my ability, have managed to get along as you can see or guess for yourself.

"Every day I have carried provisions to my husband's retreat, sternly insisting that he should not visit me at the house, or in any other way expose himself to the risk of detection. Today is his first descent from his eyrie since he came in hiding. Crazy as Moses remains, he has faithfully stood by us in this emergency. My story is ended."

By this time the meal was in readiness, and when Markham and Old Grip came in to partake of it, as agreeable an understanding seemed to have been established between them as between their wives.

After dinner it was definitely decided that the butler was to be left in suspense as to whether or not the missing letters were in Markham's possession, while everything was to be left in statu quo pending the detective's next interview with the adventurer Moresby, whose outcome was to be reported to them, when further measures should be devised accordingly.

"But here is the rub," said the detective. "You, my friends, I have no doubt, wish to retain your confidence in this man, accomplished rogue as he has confessed himself to me, while in all probability I shall at once incur his enmity by refusing, flat-footedly, his proposition with respect to his designs upon Miss Goldkirk's hand and fortune, as I have promised my wife to do."

"Say rather," interposed Luella, with dignity, "as your ordinary sense of manhood must compel you to do."

"Your amendment accepted, my dear."

Maud gravely nodded.

"As a matter of course, that is the only thing to be thought of. Blanche Goldkirk was not a lovable child, and is doubtless still less meritorious as a young lady. But her innocence and unsophistication are to be protected at any hazard."

"I knew I could depend upon you to say that, my dear," said Luella, gently.

"Thank you! But," continued Mrs. Markham, slowly, "Mr. Crimmins, much as we may seem to have been beholden to Mr. Moresby, we—I think we can no longer regard him without suspicion."

She looked inquiringly at her husband as she spoke.

"Of course!" Claude responded. "The man is a far deeper scoundrel than we had any idea of. Our main object now must be to avoid his enmity, or, at least, to avoid his making common cause with Goldkirk against us."

"That is just it!" exclaimed Old Grip, with a relieved air. "Well, you will leave it all to me, I suppose."

"We shall trust in you implicitly, sir," responded Claude Markham, with a heartiness that was indorsed by Maud's looks. "We are in your hands."

"Thank you for this confidence. Oh, if we only really had those letters! But tell me, my friends: do you imagine that Moresby might be the real bank-robber, and consequently the present custodian of the correspondence?"

"I cannot say—but I don't know what to think—now!" replied Markham, hopelessly. "All my ideas about the man have been so rudely upset!"

"Tell me, though, this: Do you know, or can you think of any professional criminal or suspicious character with whom he may have a secret intimacy?"

Claude suddenly looked up brightly.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, eagerly; "come to think of it, I do."

"Instance, if you please?"

"A well-dressed, secretive sort of human brute, whom I used to see him with occasionally, and who always impressed me uncomfortably."

"What name does he go by?"

"His own perhaps—Matthew Peters."

The detective suddenly started up.

"Hallo!" he exclaimed, "Manchester Mat, by Jupiter!"

Then he rubbed his hands contentedly.

"Why, look you!" he explained. "This may be better news than we looked for."

"You know him?"

"I should say so! An English expert and American jail-breaker, supposed for these five years past to be somewhere in the bottom of the Hudson, with a Sing Sing prison guard's bullet in his skull."

"My friends, here is a piece of luck. The man is alive and well, it seems, and this man is Moresby's pal."

"I haven't a doubt but that they robbed the Occidental together, though Mat—as treacherous and cunning a rascal as ever plied center-bit—may well have outwitted him as to the correspondence part of the plunder."

"Look here; the man is now in my power, if I once get word with him; and, should Moresby essay to use him against us, he may find himself handling a boomerang in an uncertain wind."

Here there was heard the Wild Shoemaker's whippoorwill signal, and Maud ran to the window, only to exclaim:

"Why, here is Moses with a prisoner! And dear me! Mr. Crimmins, it is the odd little fellow who helped you along at first with your countryman's trick."

This was true, and, as the Hermit refused to enter the house, the entire party went out to him, where he had Cheese-it well in hand, with his hands tied behind his back.

"Why, Cheese-it, what brought you here?" demanded the detective.

"A message, boss; and I'd have delivered it, too, but for this old Yahoo pouncing upon me."

"What news do you bring?"

"The old gal, Mrs. Griscom, is sending a secret agent up here to spy around."

"What! Moresby himself?"

"No."

"Speak out! Who is her agent?"

"A chap we used to know for keeps, boss."

"His name?"

"Manchester Mat."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A COUNTER-STROKE.

UPON being relieved of his bonds, though not without a protest on the part of the Hermit in the form of sundry Scriptural quotations, Cheese-it told his story in brief.

He had overheard Mrs. Griscom secretly instructing the man Matthew Peters to lose no time in visiting the Markhams, and then had himself lost none by hurrying away to the Grand Central and availing himself of the 10:30 train just on the point of starting, so that he was quite confident the woman's messenger would be compelled to wait for the one two hours later. From Chappaqua he had made his way on foot.

"To what end," asked the detective, "did the forewoman instruct the man to come here?"

"I could only overhear a few words, boss," was the reply. "But I heard your name mentioned, and shouldn't wonder if she suspected—perhaps through Moresby—your being here."

But how could even Moresby have suspected this? The detective knitted his brows and reflected, but to little purpose.

"However," he said, "we must be on the lookout for this fellow, Peters. Making due allowances for Cheese-it's loss of time in footing it here from Chappaqua, he ought to be on hand an hour hence."

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord!" suddenly cried the Wild Shoemaker, lifting up his ungainly but powerful arms and shaking them abroad fantastically. "He delivereth the enemy into my hands that I may smite him hip and thigh! My friends, leave the Philistine to me, and willingly will I yield him up to you bound hand and foot, as did the Gideonite of old."

Claude Markham made a sign to the detective.

"Not such a bad idea!" he said.

Old Grip shook his head.

"I can probably do better than that," he said, "by forcing the man to be our secret ally, as against Moresby, Goldkirk, or both, as the case may be."

"However, it might be as well for you, Mrs. Markham and yourself to see him alone first, in order to be certain as to the drift of his instructions."

"Should he not suspect my having forestalled him with you, all will be well."

"If the contrary, I shall be in readiness to see what I can make of him."

"In the mean time Moses here might post himself on the lookout and within call in the event of his services being required."

This plan was unanimously agreed upon, the entire party retiring into the house with the exception of the Hermit, who at once dashed off up among the rocks.

Presently, from one of the parlor windows on that side, they perceived him take up his station high up on a rocky and wood-grown ledge whence Maud said he could command an uninterrupted view of the Whippoorwill and adjoining roads to a great distance.

"There is one thing I must ask about," said Grip, addressing himself to the couple. "As to this Etna Laundry business, what do you know about it?"

"For my part," replied Maud, "only very little, and that by hearsay."

"To the best of my knowledge," her husband said, after a pause, "the business has been in operation about a year. Moresby told me that Mrs. Griscom was an old friend of his, who had had experience in the business in London, and he gave me to understand that he was supplying her with the necessary capital. Of course, there can be no laundry company, save as he and she compose one. I shouldn't wonder if the woman has made it a paying concern, in spite of Moresby having perhaps intended it as a cover for some other and less legitimate operations on his own part; for, from the little I saw of her, she struck me as being shrewd, capable and energetic, besides thoroughly conversant with the business in its many details."

"You were then aware, I suppose, of Moresby occupying those private rooms in connection with the laundry?"

"Yes; I have visited him there. They are about the most unexpectedly magnificent rooms that one could well imagine."

"Humph! Let me ask if it was Moresby who introduced you to Mrs. Griscom?"

"No; I once called at the laundry office to inquire about him, and in that way made the woman's acquaintance. Perhaps I met her, always briefly, half a dozen times after that, but not oftener."

"Ever meet the woman and Moresby together?"

"No," reflecting. "Oddly enough, when I come to think of it, I never did."

"And Cheese-it reports that Moresby in his own person is a mystery about the place—that even when he calls in the character of Count Montalbert, it is invariably, and seemingly to

his disappointment, at such times when the woman is absent."

"This is somewhat, but not altogether, unaccountable to me. You must know, however, that I never heard of this Count Montalbert's impersonation, or knew of his personating any fictitious character whatever, until informed to that effect by you."

"But I now recollect of his once saying to me something about a precaution he took of never permitting himself to be seen in the old forewoman's company."

"Didn't that strike you as being very odd, to say the least?"

Claude smiled.

"Very likely," he replied. "But I had become used to so many oddities about Moresby that perhaps this one did not strike me as particularly noteworthy at the time."

"Did he ever have this man Peters to visit him at his private den there?"

"No, no; not he! That is, I should think not. Moresby was, or affected to be, very fastidious and exclusive. The few times that I chanced to see the man in his company were by accident, and then it struck me that he was rather ashamed of him; though he once vouchsafed to mention the man's name as being under certain obligations to him, after which he added: 'But you will never want to have anything to do with Peters, Claude. He isn't your sort—nor altogether mine either, for that matter.'"

"Let me see," said the detective, "what sort of appearing man is Mat Peters as you recollect him?"

"Rather flashily dressed, short, very heavily and strong built, with a very thick bull-neck."

"The cut of his jib to a dot! How about his face?"

"Very florid, chiefly noticeable for an enormous hooked nose."

"Hallo! that won't do. However, the fellow may be disguised."

The conversation continued in this strain for some time longer, until at last Cheese-it, who had stationed himself at the side-window, called out:

"I reckon the old Gospel-slinger is off his nut. Anyway, he's acting sort of queer."

Maud, who had just returned from the kitchen with Luella, ran to the window.

"Moses is signaling," she said. "It must be that the messenger is in sight."

At the same time there came floating to them from far away the whippoorwill call of the Hermit.

It was then agreed that Maud should be out in front of the house for the purpose of first receiving the messenger there.

Meanwhile the Hermit had disappeared from his high-perched lookout.

Ten minutes after Maud had set herself to work with a lawn-rake on the little apology for a grass-plot between the rickety front porch and the yet ricketier road-gate, there came a clatter of hoofs from around the curve in the stony road, and then the anticipated messenger made his appearance mounted on a spirited roan horse.

He was much such a man as Markham had laconically described him.

He at once put down his horse to a walk, and approached the gate with a cautious and suspicious air.

"Can you direct me to Mrs. Markham's place, ma'am?" he politely called out to Maud over the gate.

She eyed him narrowly, and then looked about her with an air of alertness equalling his own.

"This is her place, sir," she then replied, "and I am she. What is it that you want?"

"I have an important message for you," said the man, instantly dismounting. "Let me see," with a dubious glance at the shaky fence, "Where can I tie my horse, please?"

She pointed to a sapling growing at the opposite roadside, without inviting him to come up the driveway, and he, seemingly a little reluctantly, availed himself of the direction.

Then he came into the grounds, where she was awaiting him, leaning picturesquely upon her rake, her graceful figure, easy attitude and broad-brimmed hat affording something of a Maud Muller suggestion. And she was also near enough the house for those within to overhear distinctly what might pass.

But the visitor seemed for the time being to quite forget his message.

"By Jingol!" he exclaimed, with a look of bold admiration emanating devouringly from either side of his great hooked nose as it focused upon her; "but you are a stunner, ma'am!"

"Sir!"

"Oh, don't mind me! It's all your own fault for being so all-fired good-looking, you know. You're a daisy!"

"You spoke of having a message for me?"

"Sure as you live."

"Give it me at once, or take yourself off."

"Oh, come off now! No hurry."

"Who sent you here?"

"Miss Griscom."

"Don't know her. Better inquire elsewhere."

"Hold on! I was to mention the name of Moresby in case you should kick."

"Indeed! Well, I'm not kicking that I am aware of."
 "You know Mr. Moresby."
 "Yes."
 "Well, I was to say say three words, that would cause you to let me have speech with your husband, no less than yourself."
 "What words are they?"
 "These," with a swift glance around, and in a lower voice: "Try, trust, trapped!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A BOLD GAME.

"THAT will do," said Maud, quietly. "It happens, for a rarity, that my husband is within call."

Claude then made his appearance in response to her summons.

"Ah, it is Mr. Peters!" he said, after pretending a critical examination of the visitor's face.

Peters looked a little abashed at the probability of his attempted gallantries having been overheard, but quickly rallied his impudence, of which he seemed gifted with an unlimited stock.

"Yes, that's me, Mr. Markham," he briskly responded. "Well, how do we come along in our rusticity, and how are we feeling?"

"You've a message for me, perhaps?" sternly. "Out with it!"

"Why, certainly, of course, to be sure, and why not? Message's from Old Lady Griscom, or rather from Mr. Moresby through the old gal."

"What word does Moresby send me?"

"I'm to find out something before I answer that question."

"Find it out, then."

"Have you had any previous visit to-day—for instance, from a chap who might have been a detective in disguise?"

"No."

"Sure pop?"

"I'm not in the habit of reiterating my replies," haughtily.

"Oh, lor!" with assumed wonder, and then laughing boisterously at his own joke; "ain't you, though?"

"Don't be too familiar, my man, or I might be tempted to kick you into the road."

"Ha! and what would I be doing? However, I wasn't sent here to quarrel."

"Then don't act so much like a hog."

"What! bristles and all?"

"Yes."

"Look here; have you had any previous visitor to-day?"

"Yes."

"What sort?"

"A detective."

"You denied it when I asked you."

"Stick to the fact; you asked about a detective in disguise."

"Oh!"

"Just so."

"What detective was it?"

"Did Moresby authorize this preliminary inquiry on your part?"

"Try, trust and trapped."

"Good enough! The detective was Old Grip."

Peters started, but instantly recovered himself, saying:

"That is just what Moresby feared."

"Well, the visit hasn't caused me any particular fear."

"No?" in unaffected surprise.

"None whatever."

"You haven't been wont," with a sneer, "to think so complacently of detectives—least of all that special sleuth-hound you mention."

"That is my affair, not yours."

"Moresby authorized me to question you still further."

"I have your word for it."

"Better than that."

"What better?"

"Try, trust, trapped!"

"Oh, yes! go ahead."

"Old Grip didn't come to arrest you?"

"Of course not, or he wouldn't have interviewed me."

"What did he come for?"

"To treat."

"To treat?"

"Bargain, if you prefer it."

"To bargain for what?"

"I refuse to say."

"Try, trust, trapped!"

"I still refuse."

"Beware, friend! this is playing with an edged tool."

"It may cut both ways."

"Humph! Well, did he succeed in what he came to treat for?"

"No."

"How long has he been gone?"

"I have done."

"Beware, I warn you yet again! Try, trust, trapped!"

"Go to the devil!"

"Perhaps you are nearer in his clutch than I. Now I will tell you my message—in the event of finding you just as I do find you, namely: raising the suspicion that you are becoming friendly with that man, Old Grip."

"Why don't you tell it?"

"Beware of Moresby!" threateningly. "He holds your fate in the hollow of his hand."

"His palm is a broad one, then."

"You must forswear the detective forthwith, or you are doomed!"

"Through whose agency?"

"Mine, for one."

"And who are you?"

"Matthew Peters."

"Call it Manchester Mat!" called out a clear voice; and the detective stepped out of the house, followed by his wife and Cheese-it. "You're not far from Sing Sing, Mat—less than eight miles as the crow flies—for such an avowal."

"I don't know you," said the man, maintaining his composure with an effort, "nor do you me."

"Mat, you lie. It is your nickname—'Manchester Mat.'"

"Let us see!" And with a sudden spring and lightning-like movement, the detective seized him by the nose.

The greater part of it—or rather, the cunningly devised artificial enlargement of it—came off in his hand.

Matthew Peters was suddenly become a very stubby snub-nosed individual, greatly altered, if not improved in his general appearance.

Without a word he suddenly turned, took the front fence at a leap and was bounding across the road for his horse like a panther.

The detective had no need to pursue, since the rascal's flight was otherwise intercepted.

There was the sharp, by this time familiar whippoorwill cry; a great, ungainly form flashed into the road from an adjoining thicket, and then the fugitive was in the tigerish clutch of the Wild Shoemaker.

He managed to half-draw a revolver, but was disarmed in an instant, and was then like a rag in the giant's clutch.

"His neck is clothed with thunder, and he snuffeth the battle afar off!" cried Moses, shaking the fellow in the air as a terrier would a rat.

"Lo! the mighty are put down from the high places, and the humble are exalted!"

But Maud called out to him in a warning tone, and when he had landed his struggling victim once more on the little strip of lawn, Old Grip was waiting there alone, the others having slipped back into the house in obedience to a sign from him.

"Leave the man to me, Moses, and remain within call, if you like," said the detective.

"The wicked flee when no man pursueth," returned the textualist, dubiously. "The son of Belial might even take to his heels again."

"He will not run away from me again. Besides, should he do so, are you not still available, Moses, with your hawk-like swoop?"

The simile seemed to please the Hermit mightily, and he accordingly retired to a distance.

Peters seemed to shrivel with fear or despair in the presence of the piercing-eyed, calm-browed detective.

"You've downed me at last," he said, sullenly. "Take or send me back to the quod at Sing Sing when you please, and be blowed to you!"

"A pity to do that, Mat, especially when you've long since been deemed dead, and are consequently no longer looked for," was the quiet reply.

The dead-alive, as he might be called, looked up quickly.

"Pity and Old Grip!" he sneered.

"The combination may not be so absurd as you imagine."

"You can't mean," with a sudden but flitting hopefulness, "that you would spare me?"

"I mean just that—on a condition or agreement that you can easily afford to make."

"Name it!" eagerly.

"You must answer me one question first—on my assurance, herewith pledged, that your answer shall never be used against you, personally."

"I'll answer it!"

"Were you, singly or otherwise, engaged in the Occidental Bank robbery?"

"No, by Heaven!"

"But you know who was?"

"I do, but can't and daren't give him away—at least, not yet awhile."

"That is all. Here then is my condition upon which you can go free. Be my secret ally, instead of Moresby's, or Jud Jelliffe's, for one week from this, and you are still as the dead-alive among men."

"I'm afraid of Jelliffe," said Peters, after a long pause, in which he had seemed to be thinking hard, "though I acknowledge I have no liking for the man."

"Of course not, since he also doubtless holds your secret, and is probably not the easiest of taskmasters. Take your time in thinking it over, Mat."

CHAPTER XXVI.

A NEW ALLY.

PETERS again seemed considering hard, but after a still longer pause, he slightly clinched his hands while his brow cleared.

"I'll do it!" he said. "I'd sooner trust you than him, and—I'll do it!" determinedly.

"Good! I must have your oath to this effect."

"Much good that would do as a strengthener!" with a short laugh. "An oath from Manchester Mat!"

"Yes; there is one oath that you will respect—that you dare not break."

"What!" with a startled look; "you know—"

The detective nodded, with his iron smile, that could be so terrible when he chose.

"Just that, and none other!" he interrupted, in a low voice. "And," contemptuously, "it isn't of the *Try-trust trapped* order, either."

Peters looked at him fearfully, and then drew a long breath.

"Go on!" he said between his clinched teeth.

The detective suddenly grabbed the man by both shoulders—it was almost an embrace—and clapping his lips to his ear, gave utterance to a low, thrilling whisper.

Whatever was the nature of the oath demanded, or pronounced, it seemed to have an extraordinary effect upon Peters.

With a hushed, awed look in his coarse features, he nodded, and swiftly responded in kind, both as to manner and speech.

Then a hand-grip was silently exchanged, and without another word the man strode out of the gate, crossed the road, mounted his horse, and, not casting a single glance back at the house, rode away.

"Have no apprehensions, my friends," smilingly observed Old Grip, on being rejoined by the party within doors, together with the Wild Shoemaker; "that man is henceforth mine."

Every one seemed to experience a sense of relief, without it would seem exactly knowing why, and the Hermit, with a new look of respect in his wild face, suddenly touched the detective on the arm.

"Mystic and awful is the sacred word!" he exclaimed. "It is spoken and men bow, even the birds of the air and the beasts of the field tremble and obey."

With that he darted away, and they presently saw him with his back to them and facing a broad-sided rock high up on the crag, which, when he again drew away from it, to disappear among the rocky intricacies beyond, bore the stenciled words, in huge glaring letters: "*Glory to God in the Highest!*"

"We must now be going," said the detective. Claude Markham had already gone to the stable and brought out the hired equipage. "And how shall you manage, Cheese-it?"

"Oh, never mind me, boss," replied the lad, with his accustomed cheeriness. "Shanks's mare fetched me here, and can take me away again."

"Not if I know it!" cried Luella, who had before this noticed the boy's tired, fagged-out look. "After your good service of to-day, my dearie, you shall have the carriage-seat between Ned and me, no matter how tight the squeeze."

It was so arranged, and after the most earnest of leave-takings, the visitors drove away.

The New York domicile was reached shortly before dusk without further incident.

After a renewal of wardrobe and supper, Old Grip sent a message to Moresby, to the effect that he would visit him some time that night, and then, after exchanging some parting words with his wife and Cheese it, he set out for the banker's down-town retreat.

It was not later than eight when he reached his destination, but, as he had surmised, Goldkirk was already anxiously awaiting his appearance.

He was alone in the magnificent *salon*, which betrayed not a vestige of the preceding night's orgies, when the detective entered.

"Your news? your news?" repeated the banker, feverishly. "What is it that you bring me, Crimmins?"

The detective seated himself with a grave shake of the head.

"What, nothing?" cried Goldkirk, despairingly.

"Not a scrap, not a rap!"

"Won't they treat?"

"No."

"You couldn't have offered 'em enough," savagely.

"The deuce I didn't! They might make themselves rich at your expense. They know that much."

"And they wouldn't give up the letters?"

"They say—well they won't say one way or the other to you."

"As to what?"

"Whether they have the letters or not."

"Ah! their cunning, their trickery!"

"Perhaps so."

"For, of course, they must have the letters, man!"

Old Grip slightly shrugged his shoulders by way of reply.

"Curse it all!" exclaimed Goldkirk, furiously. "You must have made 'em afraid of you; you couldn't have approached 'em properly."

"Suppose you try it on yourself."

"You know I couldn't even make the attempt. It would be madness!"

The banker sprung out of his luxurious chair, drained a glass of raw brandy from a little table near at hand, after an inviting gesture which was declined, and then began to pace the floor restlessly.

"What shall I do?" he exclaimed. "What shall I do? I must have back those letters, or I am lost; I'll be ruined, ostracized, kicked out of church, ruined entirely!"

The detective glanced around the superb apartments suggestively.

"You'd still be rich, though," he said, consolingly, "and you would still have your pleasures."

The banker burst into a harsh laugh.

"What pleasures?" he cried. "What enjoyment would be left me if I were publicly and socially branded as—as no longer respectable?"

"Well, with a satire that was not perceived, 'you seemed to be enjoying yourself, after a certain fashion last night, at all events.'"

"Pish! Would one of those guzzling toppers have cared a cent for me but for my money?"

"But," with another shrug, "you'd still have your money, wouldn't you?"

"Ah, yes; I suppose so."

"Well, and what species of happiness of your sort," contemptuously, "can't continue to be bought?"

Goldkirk glared angrily at him, and then, mastering his anger, threw himself into his chair again, the picture of anxiety and mental distress.

"Can't you or won't you try to help me out, Crimmins?" he exclaimed, piteously.

"Well, there's Moresby might get you back the letters."

The banker stared.

"Who the deuce is Moresby?"

The detective bit his lip. He had been guilty of a stupidity sufficiently rare with him—a slip of the tongue.

"I was thinking of something else," he said.

"I got two names mixed up."

Goldkirk looked at him suspiciously, but the detective's face was perfectly innocent.

"Who," he demanded, "did you mean, then, that might get me back the letters?"

"Montalbert," was the reply, after a short pause.

The banker made a furious gesture, and then looked up in surprise.

"The count, you mean—or the fellow who calls himself such?"

"Yes."

"But how should he know anything about the letters?"

"I don't say he does. But these foreigners of title and distinction—"

"Foreign fiddlesticks!"

"Are apt to be energetic and shrewd when wife-and-fortune-seeking."

"I should say so!"

"And it seems evident at a glance that Montalbert is 'dead gone,' as they say, on your daughter."

Goldkirk fairly bounded in his seat.

"Never mention that scoundrel's name in my presence again!" he fumed.

"Hallo!" in surprise that was more or less genuine; "has the count—"

"Count the deuce! An adventurer, a gilded tramp, a rascal, and no more of a nobleman than you or I!"

"How did you learn all this, sir?"

"What matters it? Well, a newspaper writer, who had met the dead-beat in London and Paris, told me. I doubt not that the man may even have been a professional criminal. Gaugh!"

"Indeed!"

"Yes; Lord, if I had but known this before the impudent rascal took my daughter out driving this morning, to be gone half the day with her! But let it pass. Should he enter my house again, I shall have him incontinently kicked out of doors!"

"But this is very remarkable!"

"Not at all. They're of a piece, the whole beggarly, fortune-seeking, dirty gang, who swarm over here like flies, to gobble up our daughters and our money! Good-night, Crimmins. Come and see me again when I'm in a better humor. In the meantime, try to think up some way of helping me out."

The detective accordingly took his departure, and the folding-doors were hardly closed behind him before a lisp little feminine laugh was heard in the room he had just quitted.

The banker was evidently still bent on consoling himself after his taste.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MORESBY AT HOME.

It was still not ten o'clock when the detective reached the Etna Steam Laundry building.

It seemed absolutely lifeless, and the up-town, east-side cross street in which it stood, not far from the river, was wholly deserted.

Mindful of the directions he had received, the detective passed up through the narrow, covered alleyway, and found himself in an inclosed area or court, which was feebly illuminated by a small gas-light set against an apparently

blank boarded wall to his left, as he made the turn.

No doorway of any sort visible.

However, as he had been directed, he knocked sharply three times against the wall.

There was a noise, as of a slight move at one of the darkened windows high overhead.

Then, after a brief pause, the entire wooden and outer sheathing of the wall, for the space of a dozen feet up, slid easily and noiselessly to one side, after the manner of a well-constructed carriage-house door.

A brick inner wall was revealed, with a deep-set closed door in the center.

As the entire operation looked like an invitation, the detective unhesitatingly placed his hand on the knob.

It easily turned, the door went back softly on its hinges, and he found himself in the rear of the sumptuous little passage adjoining the laundry office.

"Come right up-stairs!" called out a voice, somewhat hollow or muffled, as if through the medium of a concealed speaking-tube.

Old Grip obeyed, the door noiselessly closing of itself behind him.

Up and up four flights he passed, his step rendered soundless by the deep, rich texture of the stair-carpeting on which he trod.

Montalbert and a cordial hand-shake were awaiting him at the top of the last stair, where there was another little hall, exquisitely paneled, carpeted, with some tasteful paintings on the walls, and prettily lighted by a single gas-jet inclosed in a pink-colored glass globe.

"Come right in," was the adventurer's genial greeting, with a wave of the hand toward an open door. "I'd somehow have expected you, even without the telegram you sent."

Entering the door, the detective found himself in the first of a suite of rooms, communicating by partly-open *portières*, whose rich and yet exquisitely tasteful appointments and furnishings were no less luxurious than those of the banker himself, which they, nevertheless, powerfully contrasted by reason of the chasteness and purity of everything in sight.

From the sort of library or study, into which they had stepped, through the larger connecting apartments, and to the bed chamber interior disclosed at the far end, the suite was absolutely faultless.

They might have been the elaborate conceit of a student of æsthetic tastes, with an innate knowledge of decorative art at his fingers' ends, and an utter disregard of expense.

The pictures on the walls, both engraved and colored, were of the best art and the purest of subjects.

The books on the library shelves had the solid and yet not too new appearance of being collected to read. The magazines and other periodicals scattered over the table, and in the scanning of which the occupant had evidently been just interrupted by the detective's arrival, were of a standard character, including several of a scientific nature.

At each side of the table stood invitingly great lazy-backed arm-chairs, substantially upholstered in violet-tinted morocco, in front of a cheerful, briskly-burning grate-fire which just appropriately tempered the growing chill of the October night.

But, stranger than all, the mien and manner of the adventurer himself had undergone a metamorphosis in harmony with his changed surroundings.

The reckless, happy-go-lucky air had given place to a reserved, thoughtful look, in excellent keeping with his dark, intellectual face, save for an occasional evil or sinister look in the gloomy eyes, suggestive of some sort of devilry kept in vigilant but complete control. And even the movements of his powerful but spare frame, looking at its best in an elegant flowered dressing-gown, carelessly confined at the waist with a thick gold and scarlet cord, had somehow taken on a slower, more dignified expression, as if his entrance into these beautiful rooms, with their exalting, softening influence, was signalized by a sloughing off of his hard worldliness, his roguery, his unprincipledness, and all that, as a charmed serpent might slough off its every-day glittering hideousness of scale and spot and stripe, to the revelation of a gentle and refined individuality altogether other than its own.

"Pray be seated," said Montalbert, in a grave, sweet voice.

And then, going to a superb buffet, only a part of whose elaborate carvings were visible in the room immediately adjoining, he returned with wine, glasses and cigars.

"Let us be *en camarade*," he continued, seating himself and filling the delicate glasses. "Try that."

"It is simply delicious!" was the visitor's unhesitating verdict, after sipping at his glass. "What is it?"

"A cordial, chiefly composed of *Chateau Margaux*, tintured with *Maraschino*. I hope you will find the cigars to match," showing over the box.

The detective accepted and lighted one, which proved to be a *Cabaña* of the very rarest flavor.

"Exquisite!" He laughed. "This sort of thing throws my own poor hospitality altogether into the shade."

"Not at all; a difference, that is all. Beer is of the world; wine—that is, the most delicate wine—is of the soul. My friend," Montalbert bent his changed eyes upon his guest with a solemn anxiety in their dusky depths, "this is my true life—the life to which I was born and bred, and must ever more crave, as a doomed devil in hell must crave the heavenly purity he has so madly dashed aside—this as you see me now and thus environed. It is my paradise. When I step out of its hallowed precincts, I am once more of the world worldly—hard, defiant, remorseless, bad—rogue and devil to the core. Can you understand a contradictory duality—a combination of the opposing poles of morality—such as this?"

"I cannot," frankly replied the detective, who had listened, as he had noted everything in these unexpected environments, in silent wonder.

"And yet it is not unique in me," reflectively. "The worst profligate of the misnamed Merry Monarch's corrupt court—'merry?' worthless, corrupt, beastly, any other adjective had been more appropriate!—the Earl of Rochester had his other self within himself, his hours and even days of seclusion, meditation, asceticism, doubtless also his remorse. And yet did it break him of the animal, the devil-prompted, irresistible outer self that was his destruction and damnation, body and soul—as it must be mine?"

"Nero and Caligula were virtue-loving, amiable men (the angel in their natures uppermost) before the devil-side of their dualities, evoked to the surface by the exercise of uncontrolled power, made them madmen and demons."

"A cold-blooded murderer was guillotined in Paris not so long ago, who in his saner and choicer hours was an enthusiastic student of the arts and sciences, and had even written a valuable work upon botany—think of that, the science of flowers, the most beautiful, delicate and typical of inanimate things."

"But examples could be cited without number, were I not the strangest and aptest illustration in myself."

He went on at much greater length, and then, alluding to some new scientific discoveries in one of the periodicals at his elbow, discussed the subject with a learning, scope, comprehension, and above all, with a keen and enjoyable zest which fairly completed his visitor's surprise.

"Now look you, my friend," continued Montalbert, with glowing eyes and earnest face, "I have not granted you this glimpse into my better life—the sanctum-sanctorum of my spiritual, as opposed to my devil-controlled animal, self—for nothing, as you may well believe."

"But answer me this question first: Do you believe in what you have seen, and what I have told you, to be actually existent, and not merely cunningly counterfeited?"

"I don't know whether I do or not," replied the detective, after a long and troubled pause.

"I can only say this: That if it is counterfeited, you are unquestionably the most accomplished and intellectual and fascinating charlatan this side—well, this side of Joseph Balsamo, otherwise Count Cagliostro."

"Nay," earnestly, almost pleadingly, "but say one or the other. Do you or do you not believe in my sincerity in this?"

"Yes," half-desperately.

"Thank you!" with brightening eyes and manner. "Oh, I thank you, my friend! And now that I have wrung this reluctant acknowledgment from you, tell me this:

"Am I, or am I not, capable, with this better side of me in the ascendant, of loving a pure, sweet young woman as she ought to be loved, and making her a passably decent and considerate husband?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MOST REMARKABLE ADVENTURER.

At last the worldly drift of Montalbert, through all the attractive æstheticism which he had so skillfully revealed in his strangely contradictory character, or so cleverly dissimulated, it was difficult to say which, was sufficiently apparent to the detective.

The latter smiled and drew a breath of secret relief.

It was comfortable to get back into the everyday sordid world once more with this most remarkable adventurer, and meet him fairly upon ground that was so common to both.

"Why not," he said, "ask me outright whether or not I am here to accede to your original proposition of hands off! in your designs upon the banker's daughter's hand and fortune?"

Montalbert smiled in reply, but in a grave, refined way, not in the slightest suggestive of his rollicking whilom self—or of his demon-prompted corporeal part, as he might have explained in his present psychological vein.

"Have it so!" he sighed, replenishing the delicate glasses a little wearily, and with a slight

flush coming into his dark cheeks. "As you will, my friend. What then is your answer?"

"A refusal! I cannot and shall not consent to your proposition."

Montalbert slightly paled, and yet his manner was not wholly that of having expected a different answer with much confidence.

"It is said," he replied, regretfully. "You are not a man whose determination, once formed, can be shaken. I shall not, therefore, make any attempt to urge my case further with you."

"I am glad to hear that, Moresby!" cried Old Grip, with genuine heartiness. "For, to tell the truth, outside of this matter, I have come to like and admire you—in spite of myself."

The barest perceptible shrug of deprecation, accompanied by an elevation of the eyebrows, was the adventurer's response to this rather barren compliment.

"I might truthfully return your politeness," he said, after a moment's thought, "by certain expressions of respect and esteem for yourself. But all this is no longer to the purpose."

"Let us see just exactly how we stand to each other. Is it," with a strange smile, "to be as enemies, and war to the knife?"

"Not by my own seeking, I assure you. Look here: if I cannot help you, I can at least place you on your guard, and I will do so. Listen."

He forthwith sketched the result of his mission as Goldkirk's agent to the Markhams, knowing perfectly well that Manchester Mat would have already told him this much, or as much as he had been able to infer; but, of course, without saying a word of the friendship that had been cemented with the Whippoorwill couple.

He then described his last visit to the banker himself, together with what the latter had declared of his discovery that Montalbert was a fraud, to be ostracized and squelched.

The adventurer's eyes scintillated like steel as he listened to this last, and he impulsively thrust out his hand.

"As friend or foe, you are a good fellow, Crimmins!" he exclaimed, not without emotion. "Forewarned, forearmed!" with his deep smile. "Still, I suppose I must now look to your opposition to my marriage scheme?"

"It must be so, more or less," replied the detective, with kindred earnestness. "Still, Goldkirk will probably take the matter in his own hands from this out, so that there will doubtless never be any occasion for my appearing in the matter one way or another."

"Ah, to be sure! Come!" rising, and lifting his glass, with a brilliant and engaging smile; "a last health, and may we never have cause to hate each other any worse than now!"

"With all my heart!"

The glasses clinked, the pledge was drank, and then the guest was shown to the door with the same refined courtesy that had distinguished his reception.

At that instant, however, and at the moment of crossing out over the threshold, hat in hand, a sudden and deathly giddiness seized him.

Had that last glass of wine been drugged by some cunning sleight-of-hand?

He struggled to turn and again face his host, who was directly behind him, but was somehow incapable of the exertion.

Then, as in a dream, he saw Peters peer at him out of a deep niche at the opposite end of the hall, near the staircase landing, and make a vigorous motion to one side with his head.

Then there was a vigorous push from behind.

"Ha, ha, ha!" burst out Montalbert, in a terrible laugh. "Dolt of a detective! did you think to leave me in order to ruin me? Fool! know this, which now on the threshold of your doom I can afford to tell you: I and I alone am the robber of the Occidental Bank, and the crime-confessing letters that shall place Goldkirk under my thumb are already in my possession! I shall destroy the Markhams, your new friends, as I am about to destroy you! Your last wine-draught was poisoned by my hand. Down, down into the unknown, into the ranks of the 'mysteriously missing!'"

The spellbound detective had resisted the first push, even while incapable of turning, and with those demoniac words ringing in his ears.

Another thrust from behind was not to be resisted.

He staggered, spinning, into the middle of the hall, the floor suddenly opened beneath his feet, and he was engulfed, the opening instantly closing up over him as he disappeared.

Even at this juncture, however, he remembered that side-gesture of the head as afforded by Peters, and managed to guide his precipitation somewhat in the direction indicated.

As he did so his arm came in a grip over an invisible beam or support of some kind, and he hung suspended over the blackness.

At the same instant another object close at hand, perhaps a piece of timber loosened by the jar, went plunging and clattering down.

Then steps were heard over the resecured flooring or trap above.

"It was well done, and you were up to your task," he distinctly heard Montalbert's cold, emotionless voice remark. "Hark! there he

crashes down, down, down! And even if a bone should remain unbroken, or a breath of life be left, the poison will do for him. It has but one antidote in the world, as you know. Remain here on guard, as I shall probably not be back before daylight."

Then there were more steps, after which all was silent.

The detective's plight was most desperate.

In addition to his hanging thus suspended in the black darkness, by what sort of support and over what depths he could only dimly conjecture, the dizziness was only relieved in his head to make him the better aware of a terrible gripping pain in his stomach, occurring spasmodically, and leaving him nothing to think but that the poison was already clutching at his vitals, as perhaps but the prelude of causing him to faint, dying, from his precarious support, and go plunging down, perhaps a corpse before he should lie maimed and bleeding at the bottom of the pit.

However, by a great exertion of will and strength, he managed, after feeling along the wall, to come upon yet another beam, or something of the sort, which he succeeded in bestriding.

This relieved the strain upon his arm, and rendered his immediate position less precarious, though the agony in his stomach was now become such a tearing, rending pain that he could with difficulty abstain from screaming out.

"My God! in what a special fiend's clutches have I fallen?" he exclaimed to himself. "Cagliostro, indeed? Why, Catherine di Medici herself was pitiful and exalted in comparison! Oh, why did I not mistrust him? Why—"

He was interrupted by a ray of light, apparently reaching up to him from a great depth.

At the same time, a voice—evidently Peters's voice, but strangely hollow and muffled—called up:

"Hallo!"

The detective managed to answer.

"I am here to save you!" called up the voice again. "Can you hold on where you are for a minute or two?"

"I can try; though the poison seems eating my insides out."

"That is only apparent. Though deadly, the poison is slow, and I have an antidote in readiness. Does this light of mine penetrate to you somewhat?"

"Yes; a little."

"Examine the side of the pit where you are. You will perceive a series of regular foot and hand holds by which you can make your way down here to me."

The detective did perceive at last the supports indicated, but at the first essay found himself too weak and pain-racked to undertake the risk.

"I'm afraid I'm not equal to it," he called down. "Can't you procure a ladder, or something of the sort?"

"A ladder? This pit is seventy feet deep. And I am too heavy to shin up there to you. Try again."

The detective did make another effort—a desperate and heroic one—and this time with better success.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN THE PIT.

AFTER a series of agonized efforts, the detective at last succeeded in reaching the bottom of the pit, where he fell, half-fainting, into Peters's arms.

"Here, drink this!" exclaimed the man, pressing a tumbler to his lips. "It is the only antidote on earth, and I hope there is yet time."

Old Grip drained the contents of the glass at a single gulp.

The draft was exceedingly bitter, but its relieving effects were almost instantaneous.

The pain gradually disappeared; this was followed by a cooling and enervated feeling, and then he became so weak, so weak!

It was like a painless dying of sheer inanition.

"Here!" and Peters sympathetically helped him to stretch himself out on a heap of fine shavings or "Excelsior" upholstery material. "Now remain quiet a few minutes and I will give you something to strengthen you."

Old Grip looked about him dreamily.

The man, the lantern which he had set down on the ground, the bottom of the pit itself looked insubstantial, unreal, as if all, himself included, might somehow vanish at a breath.

Then, slowly but steadily, he began to take note of his surroundings better; his powers of observation quickened and strengthened.

The pit was box-shaped, perhaps twelve or fifteen feet square, and the walls for eighteen or twenty feet up were of brick masonry, above that of wood.

The ground was unlittered, save by the heap upon which he lay and by the beam, fallen from above, which his first precipitation through the trap-door—far, far above, further than he could see distinctly—had loosened from the upper wall against which he had violently struck in staying his descent.

Directly opposite where he lay there was a half-open door in the masonry, by which Peters had obviously entered into the pit.

At a considerable distance from this there was another door, closed, smaller and deeper set than the first, and having the appearance of being very solid and firm.

"What a lucky thing," said Peters, at last, "that you twigged my meaning in that sidelong motion of my head and acted accordingly. It was that alone that saved you. Otherwise you would have been dashed to pieces. No one else ever started on this plunge before, and lived."

The detective tried to reply, but his lips and tongue were parched beyond the power of utterance.

His rescuer first plied him with a draught of cold water, and then administered some diluted brandy, which at once revived him greatly.

"Then I am not the first who has been pitched to die like a dog in this hole?" were the detective's first utterances.

Peters pursed up his lips.

"Mr. Crimmins," said he, guardedly, "those last words of mine were a slip of the tongue. I'm here to rescue you, and I'll do it. Further than that I shall tell no tales as to particulars."

"How did you come in here?"

"From the sub-cellar of the laundry, which is on a level with the bottom of this pit."

"What is that other door?"

"A door, and a locked one."

"Indeed! and where does it lead?"

"Into a tunnel."

"A tunnel?"

"Yes; and that out on to the river-front, over-browed deep water, alongside a sewer. Now that is all I shall tell you on that point; so you might as well be content to draw your own conclusions."

"All right!"

Then, whether from the effects of the poison, the antidote, the brandy, or something else, all was once more dreamy and confused.

How could this coarse, dead-alive ex-criminal, Manchester Mat, have proved so suddenly faithful to his new alliance, and have become so sympathetic and comparatively decent, notwithstanding the secret power of that whispered oath?

Might not the man's truth, his fidelity, even his presence there, be but a delusion, a cheating fragment of this dreaminess and unreality?

No; the mists began to clear again, and there he still sat, even anxiously watching, the lantern at one side of him, the stimulants at the other.

"You'll need a return of all your strength soon, sir," said the man. "Try another pull at the frog."

Old Grip did so to advantage.

"I suppose I can talk to you," he said, "in the interim?"

"Oh, yes! that born devil won't be back to inspect the pit till daylight."

"Answer me some questions, then."

"Go ahead, Mr. Crimmins."

"Why should the villain have essayed the poison with me, since the pit trick might have so readily sufficed?"

"Ah, but it didn't suffice in your case, and Jud Jelliffe is fond of having a sure thing. See?"

"Have you been his confederate for long?"

"Call it his slave, and yes! He held me by the same secret that you do."

"That is one of my present unrealities. I can't quite believe in your fidelity to me."

"I'd sooner trust in your mercy than Jelliffe's. Would I have given you that hint at the top of the pit if I hadn't meant the square thing—or be here now, for that matter?"

"True; forgive me."

"It's all right, sir. Besides, in addition to your holding me by the same secret, can I forget that oath?"

"True again. By the way, what was that other oath or password, 'Try, trust, trapped'?"

"Just a password, and no more, of a secret society that Jelliffe has organized within the past few years. Drop that!"

"Good! Tell me this, though. You heard Moresby's declaration of being the bank-robber and the possessor of those missing letters?"

"Yes, sir; and with no less surprise than your own."

"What?"

"Gospel truth! Up to that moment, he had humbugged me completely. Even now I can't quite understand it."

"The man is a mystery."

"You bet!"

"This strange double life that he claims to lead—the refined, or student half of him, as exemplified by his surroundings in those beautiful rooms?"

"No humbug about that. He has always seemed angel and devil in that mystifying way. Had you fallen in with his designs, you might have gone away positively admiring while wondering at him."

"That is true."

"You can now, also, understand something of the hold he exercised over that well-bred chap, Claude Markham. You see, it was most—"

ly, if not wholly, this attractive or angel side that was presented to the young fellow."

"I can understand it now. How am I to get out of this?"

"Look here! I've been thinking. There is a good dodge you can put upon Jelliffe now."

"Ah! the dead-alive dodge?"

"Exactly; just the one that I have been playing upon the prison folks so successfully."

"But Jelliffe will inspect the pit here, with the expectation of finding my dead body."

"That can be managed. I shall tell him you were so smashed up that I couldn't endure the thought of your corpse lying here, and consequently carried it out through the tunnel."

"A good idea!"

"Well, then," reflectively, "we'll have to quit the pit by that means now, to give color to the deception."

"I am ready," and Old Grip managed to sit up.

"Are you sure you're strong enough?"

"Nothing like trying. Give me the rest of the brandy."

This was done, and the detective then got upon his feet unaided.

"You'll do!" said Peters.

Drawing a key from his pocket, he approached the deep-set little door.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE ESCAPE.

THE door yielded, after some little difficulty, to the man's manipulations, and the entrance to the tunnel was disclosed.

To make a long story shorter, it was finally threaded from beginning to end, and the explorers at last found themselves seated on the river-bluff, overlooking the dark rush of the ebb-tide along the sea-wall.

They had come out on a lonely and wooded bank, such as are still frequent along the East Side or Yorkville river-front, and were not far distant from the foot of Eighty-sixth street and what is known as the East River Park.

But the passage of the tunnel had been a tedious and exhaustive one, and the enfeebled detective was glad at last to sink down, panting and dizzy, upon the turf.

"That is right," said Peters, taking a seat at his side. "Time enough."

"How shall you manage?" asked Old Grip, after a breathing-space.

"Oh, easily enough, now that I think it over in this early morning coolness. I'll manage to get back into the pit just about the time Jelliffe visits it. And there before us is my excuse for having forestalled his inspection in the disposal of your dead body."

"What do you mean?"

"The tide. Look at it."

"Well?"

"It is the double-headed ebb, as they call it hereabouts. Half an hour later than now, a corpse, newly chucked into the rushing, swirling water there, would stand a chance of being stranded up yonder on one of the Hell Gate rocks, or perhaps down yonder in the reef-shallows that girdle the light-house point of Blackwell's Island. Now, however, it's ten to one that it would be swept straight down out through the Narrows, unless tangled up with the shipping or pier-spiles."

"Ah!"

"Nothing like taking advantage of the tides, you see, when getting rid of a corpse."

"I understand."

"As for yourself, you must skulk back home and keep there. It will be days before you are finally rid of those poison-effects. Put that shrewd little boy of yours in communication with me. And he'd better still be coming to the laundry, sort of down-in-the-mouth over your mysterious disappearance. But, of course, you understand."

"Yes; the plan is good."

"Good-by and good-luck, then! If you're able, you'd better be getting along while it is still dark."

With a grasp of the hand, doubtless earnest enough on either part, they separated.

Still faint and weak, the detective succeeded in reaching his home in secrecy, telling his story, and being put to bed, where in a short time, though under his wife's loving care, he was in a mild but persistent delirious fever.

As for Peters, he had calculated his chances so nicely that when, shortly after daylight, he returned to the pit bottom by means of the tunnel, he found Moresby already awaiting him there, lantern in hand.

"So! I was just about to follow you out," said the adventurer, sternly. "What did you mean by removing the body, without orders?"

"Have you forgotten the tide business?" inquired Manchester Mat in his turn. "I was just in time for the ebb, which has like enough floated the stiff half-way down to the Battery by this time. Or did you want to keep the thing lying here for twenty-four hours?"

"Humph! I should have preferred to inspect the body first. However, the man was quite done for, I suppose?"

"Deader than a mackerel! Look where he struck," pointing to several imaginary marks on the pit-walls; "and he brought that big beam

down with him, into the bargain. No blood, though, strange to say; for there seemed to be hardly an unbroken bone in his skin."

"That will do. The man was my chief danger, though I had come to have a sort of liking for him. No more likings and softnesses for me, however! The treachery of those Markhams has proved that sufficiently. Come up!"

Moresby was in full evening dress, and looking at his best.

When they had made their way to his rooms on the top floor, he sat down and penned a note.

"This is for Mrs. Griscom as soon as she reaches the office," he said. "See that she gets it. It may necessitate her absence from the laundry for the greater part of the day. By the way, you might as well be around, keeping your eye on that little rascal, Jimmy. He is, or rather was, Old Grip's secret spy, as you know."

"I do know it."

"Well, sound him as to how the wife may be taking her husband's disappearance, but very cautiously, you know."

"All right."

"Be off, then. I'm tired out, and shall probably sleep the greater part of the day."

"Hold on, Jud! You haven't given me a rap for days. I'm broke."

Moresby made an impatient gesture, but restrained himself, handed over some small bills without a word, and then almost pushed Peters out of the apartments, fastening the door in his face.

Peters did not even growl under his breath, but went off contentedly to his breakfast.

When he returned, an hour or so later, the steam laundry was in busy operation, and Mrs. Griscom was at her office-desk.

She took and read the note without comment.

"Send the boy Sammy to me as you pass out, Mr. Peters," she said, abruptly. "And when you see Mr. Moresby again, you can merely say that I shall do as he suggests. What are you lingering for?" with something like a smile.

Peters grinned and looked a little sheepish.

In spite of her fast silvering hair, her unusual stature and her brusque business ways, the forewoman was not without her middle-aged attractions, and Peters had been aware of them for some time past.

"What are you so curt and savage about, ma'm?" he asked.

"But I'm not, Mat," with a little laugh that softened and sweetened her dark face. "Why should I be?"

"Have you ever spoken to Moresby about that little affair of ours yet?"

"Pshaw! no. He wouldn't hear of it."

"Of course he won't, if you never speak of it."

"But I've told you repeatedly that you and I can never marry, Mat."

"Bosh! So you have, Nancy, but without ever telling me *why* we can't. Give me your hand!"

But here the entrance of the boy Sammy, of his own accord, cut short Mr. Peters's scrap of love-making, and he went away.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE FOREWOMAN.

"SAMMY," said Mrs. Griscom, "has that new boy, Jimmy Fox, made his appearance yet?"

"No, ma'm. He's late to-day."

"Send him to me directly he comes."

"Jimmy" put in an appearance shortly thereafter, looking almost like a different being he seemed so troubled and anxious.

"What is the matter with you, Jimmy? You look like a little ghost."

"Nothin', ma'm."

"Come now, you must be more truthful, my little man, or you and I will fall out."

"I don't like to tell."

"Come here!" she drew him to her side in a kindly, motherly way that was rare with her.

"You must know that I know your secret."

"Lor, ma'm!"

"Yes, that you are really in the employ of Old Grip, the detective. You must know that I know all about you by this time, through my friend, Mr. Moresby."

Cheese-it hung his head with an admirably counterfeited sheepishness.

"You see that I am not angry with you, though," continued Mrs. Griscom, with renewed kindness. "What is your real name?"

"Cheese-it."

"What a queer name!" with a little laugh.

"But it can't be your real name?"

"Yes, ma'm, it is," hanging his head. "I was a tough—that is, a street-boy—when Mr. Crimmins picked me up years ago, and that is the only name I ever knew myself by."

"Ah! and why are you so sad and dispirited this morning, with that tell-tale redness about the eyes?"

Cheese-it at once began to sob and blubber at a great rate.

"The boss hasn't come home!" he whimpered.

"What! Mr. Crimmins?"

"Yes, ma'm. Hain't showed up since last evening, and the young missus is just wild!"

"Nonsense! Such men as he must often and necessarily be out over night, and longer, too."

"Not when he fixes the hour for his coming back, ma'm—never! Oh, we're sure something awful must have happened to him."

"You mustn't think that. Such men are usually well-able to take care of themselves. But look you, my boy. In spite of the way you have deceived me, I have found you useful, and Mr. Dick Moresby says you are a real help to him in the engine-room. So you can remain in your situation, if you like."

"I would like it, ma'm!" eagerly.

"That is settled, then. But, mark you! no more deception, and you must inform me when Mr. Crimmins returns to his home."

"Oh, but he won't return, ma'm!" blubbering afresh. "He's killed or smashed somehow. I feel it in my bones that I have lost my best friend!"

"I fancy you make too much of his absence. But that will do now."

An hour or so later a beautiful and fashionably-dressed blonde lady made an unexpected appearance in the office.

It was Luella, as a matter of course, and she was to all appearances in a high state of nervous excitement.

She would hardly wait to introduce herself before bursting out with vehement and tearful demands for information about her "missing husband."

"He was to have come here to see Mr. Moresby last night. You and Mr. Moresby must explain the matter. I don't care what you may have already told our little boy, Cheese-it. My husband would have been home before this—he has never broken his promise in this respect since we were married—if you had not done away with him. Where are Mr. Moresby's rooms, anyway? Ah, I am not altogether ignorant of that evil man. He is an adventurer, and also calls himself Count Montalbert. Give me satisfaction, ma'm, or I shall call in the police! What have you done with him? Don't talk to me!"

And any quantity more in the same frenzied, incoherent strain.

The forewoman, who seemed greatly puzzled and alarmed at all this, nevertheless, waited until her visitor had talked herself fairly out of breath.

"My dear lady," she then said, sympathetically, "I cannot imagine what can have become of your husband. How should I? Do be reasonable. In fact, I never saw him but once, and then he was here disguised as a countryman. But I have explained all this to the little fellow you call Cheese-it. Wait until I can see Mr. Moresby, and if he can give me any hint as to Mr. Crimmins's disappearance I am sure he will be glad to do so. I shall send you word."

"Where is Mr. Moresby? I demand to see him at once."

"But he is not here—in fact, he is seldom here."

"Madam, I will not be tricked! He has living rooms somewhere in this building. My poor husband"—her voice breaking again—"told me so."

"Yes, he has rooms," reluctantly.

"I demand to go to them at once!"

"That would not do; your sense of propriety should tell you that. Besides, Mr. Moresby would scarcely be found there. Now do be calm, ma'm, and view this matter in a less excitable light. Leave it to me. I sympathize with your distress, and shall do all I can to relieve it."

Luella at last so far calmed down as to promise to wait for developments, and, still apparently more or less nervous and unstrung, finally consented to go back home without summoning the intervention of the police yet awhile.

Shortly after this, Mrs. Griscom, after hurrying through with some accounts, called Lucy Jarvis to take her place at the office desk, and hastily quitted the building.

She had hardly turned the first street-corner before she abruptly turned in her tracks just in time to discover Cheese-it following her, and to take him by the ear with a grip that made him wince.

"Look you, my boy!" she said, with a steely unpleasantness in her voice; "I suppose you were not following me, as a matter of course, but are only out on some errand for the engine-room, eh?"

"Yes, ma'm, that's it. Ouch! Holy mackerel! my ear!"

"Ah, indeed! but it was so long as to seem like a positive invitation to twist it. Run back to your work, my dear; and be very careful to have no more errands till you see me again."

She released him and continued on her way, but presently looked back to perceive Cheese-it and Sammy engaged in a pitched battle in the midst of a juvenile crowd on the corner she had deserted.

It was evident that Sammy, after viewing the ear-twisting, had endeavored to poke a lit-

tle fun at his associate, and with indifferent success.

"A bright boy, that!" muttered the forewoman, as she quickened her steps. "It will be a pity—for him—if I sha'n't be able to utilize his cleverness in my own way."

CHAPTER XXXII.

MONTALBERT'S BOLD GAME.

MR. BANK PRESIDENT GOLDKIRK was once more at his fashionably late breakfast with his daughter, in his palatial up-town residence, when a footman brought in Count Montalbert's card.

The banker could scarcely conceal his indignant embarrassment, for he had not yet had the opportunity to acquaint Blanche with his discovery of her suitor's unworthiness.

Before he could collect himself, however, the adventurer airily pushed his way into the dining-room, almost on the heels of the flunky who had brought in his card.

"Morning, Mr. Goldkirk! morn'g, mademoiselle!" he cheerily exclaimed. "My dear child, how transcendently lovely we are looking to-day! I kiss your hand," suiting the action. "Ah! *dejeuner a la fourchette en famille*? Just my good luck. Thanks, mademoiselle!" in response to a bright look of invitation from the girl. "Yes, I don't care if I do; though a crust of toast, and a cup of *café au lait*, with just a dash of *cognac* must be my sole indulgence." And he familiarly seated himself at the table, while a servant bestirred himself in obedience to a signal from Miss Goldkirk.

The banker could only glare in speechless indignation at first, and then he rose impressively.

"Count Montalbert," he said, with a significant emphasis upon the title, "I must request an interview with you at your earliest convenience. I shall await your presence in my study."

Montalbert's reply was a careless and smiling nod, and then, as Mr. Goldkirk stiffly withdrew, he resumed his complimentary chat with Blanche, who seemed sufficiently pleased with his attentions, with whatsoever coquetry she might simulate an indifference toward him.

"Papa is angry," observed the young lady, in a low voice, but without the least interest in the subject. "What can have come over him so suddenly?"

"Can't you guess?" And he fixed his dark eyes upon her, with a little laugh in them.

"Not without an effort, perhaps," with an *insouciant* shrug of the pretty shoulders, "and I never make one if I can help it. So tell me, count, at once."

"Send away the servant," he whispered, "and I will."

It soon became evident that the adventurer had resolved to play a bold game, and with precious few preliminaries.

He was no sooner alone with the fair young girl than he softly imprisoned her hand, his face aglow, his fine deep eyes resting upon her with magnetic earnestness.

"Blanche, I love you!" he exclaimed, his low, musical voice vibrating as with the intensity of all but uncontrollable emotion. "Forgive the unseemliness of such an avowal under these prosaic circumstances, but I am no longer the master of my passion. Have you not guessed it? My God! my love has become a volcano, a heart-quake. Share my title and be my wife! True, my noble and ancient name is about all I have to lay at your feet—save the devotion of a heart which you have unconsciously made your own—true, I am poor. But, ah! how I love you! Answer me, my life, my own!"

The words were not spoken, but "poured out," as a matter of course, with the customary "impassioned fervor," "indescribable excitement," and all that sort of thing, such as has become the stock-in-trade of the novel-writers in scenes of this description.

To be in keeping with this stereotyped manner of writing, Blanche should have first paled, then blushed, then trembled with vague agitation, and then have either exclaimed, "Sir, it can never be! I am sorry for this, but you must dismiss me out of your mind, out of your heart, out of your life!" or melted into his arms with an inaudible sigh sufficiently eloquent of surrender and consent, as the case might be.

But Miss Goldkirk's manner of receiving the declaration was altogether at variance with these conventionalities.

Sentimental and romantic as she was, there was none the less a hard vein of practicalness in her composition.

She was, moreover, so little of a hypocrite that, having long since secretly made up her mind that she was more in love with this man than with any one else except herself, she wasn't particularly anxious to dissemble the fact.

So, without saying a word, she merely blushed prettily and naturally, while permitting him to retain her hand, with downcast eyes, a heaving chest and other evidences of pleasurable emotion.

The "count" was becomingly ecstatic until she interrupted him with a dreamy little laugh.

"How funny it all seems, right here at the

breakfast-table, too!" she said. "But don't rave any more, at all events not at present, count. To tell the truth, I only care much for love-making in the abstract, if at all. But now tell me what all this has to do with the cause of papa's grumpishness, which you were to explain to me."

"My adored! but don't you see that this has just everything to do with it?"

"No; why should it?"

"He at last divines that I love you."

"Ah, to be sure! and is doubtless displeased in consequence?"

"Precisely, as a matter of course."

"No, no; but as a matter of perversity. Henri, when you are so charming to me, why should papa not find you charming likewise?"

"Because I am poor."

"As if that should make any difference!"

"It should not, but yet it does to him. I am sure of it."

"Henri—yes, you may kiss me just once more!—be at your ease. Papa will not venture to refuse me *anything*. Did you note with what a short turn I brought him round the other day when he so far forgot himself as to demur at my possessing a new pony and village cart? I want you, and shall have you, and there is an end. Besides, I am over eighteen, which is the legal age of feminine discretion, I believe. Don't worry at all."

"But, my dearest!" and the adventurer could with difficulty keep his countenance; "if, in spite of all your deliciously sanguine previsions, he should persist in kicking, why—"

He came to a dead pause before her puzzled stare.

"Why should he kick?" she asked. "Papa never kicks anybody or anything that I ever heard of."

"Ahem! I mean if he should persist in objecting to my suit, and even go so far as to believe in idle rumors to my disadvantage—"

"Say no more, Henri. We were meant for each other, and to each other we shall belong. I must now go up and dress for the chrysanthemum show."

So, with a parting kiss, the adventurer nonchalantly sailed off into the library for the threatened interview with his storm-sails set.

As he entered, Mr. Goldkirk was angrily pacing the floor, but before the latter could open his lips Montalbert had fired his first gun, and it was an astonisher.

"My dear Goldkirk," cried the adventurer, quite beamingly, "I am something of a previsionist—I know just exactly what it is on your lips to say to me. It is that at last you have found me out in my true character, which is that of an adventurer, a charlatan, a rascal, a pretender—in fact, no count at all, but a genuine rogue at large. Eh, my friend?"

"Well, sir," stammered the banker, fairly taken aback, "you—you are perfectly correct in your divination! Let me imitate your unblushing impudence in this much at least."

"*Bueno! excellenza!* charming!" jovially preparing a cigarette. "I knew it. I was sure of it!"

"Ah, indeed! Well, sir, since you seem so cheerful over the matter, what have you to say to it?"

"Just this, my dear financier, my glorious old money-maker!" producing a lucifer-match while flattening the end of the new-made cigarette for his lips; "that I am about to surprise you still further with a certain announcement."

"Very likely, sir; very likely!" with suppressed fury; "and what may this surprising announcement be?"

"Aha, Papa Goldkirk!" striking the match alight down the back of the banker's velvet dressing-gown: "curious as a woman, eh? Inquisitive as a rat? Keen on the scent as a hungry dog after a buried bone! Sly dog that you are, eh, sly dog?"

"Sir!" swelling to bursting, and yet inarticulate with fury.

"One minute!" puff, puff, puff! "Don't be too eager, my boy. This it is, then: I have just proposed to your adorable daughter, she has had the good sense and discrimination to accept me on the spot, and your paternal blessing and consent are the only remaining requisite to complete our happiness."

The banker stared wildly at first, and then sat himself down hard in the first chair that was convenient without a word.

Some amazements, like some of the tenderer emotions, are too deep for words, too full for utterance.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"BUSINESS, MAN, BUSINESS."

THE astounded Goldkirk's next demonstration was to reach out for an electric bell-button, when he was courteously arrested in the movement by Montalbert.

"Don't be over hasty, *mon beau père* that is to be!" the latter pleasantly interposed; "what would you ring for?"

Then the banker found voice at last.

"To have you kicked out of my doors!" he roared. "You infernal, rascally quintessence of insolence and scoundrelism! how long do

you think I am going to stand this sort of thing?"

Montalbert laughed, calmly seated himself, and producing a packet of letters, playfully shook them under the banker's nose.

"Just as long as I see fit," he smilingly replied.

Goldkirk had turned perfectly white, and was gasping painfully, like a runner or hunted man hard blown.

It was the package of missing letters, or some of them at least; even by their outsides he had recognized them at once.

"Don't be in a hurry, Papa Goldkirk," continued the adventurer, airily. "Take your time. Or if you are still bent on your flunkies kicking me into the street, you have but to touch the button."

But, instead of accepting this advice, Goldkirk made a sudden snatch for the letters—a swift, tigrish spring, accompanied by a low, hoarse cry.

The next instant he was plumped back into his chair, with a wail of physical pain, his forearm half-twisted off at the elbow, the adventurer's viselike clutch upon his wrist.

"Easy, there, easy!" said Montalbert, still smilingly, though with a dangerous inflection in his soft voice. "There now; are you going to be civilized and reasonable?"

Goldkirk nodded, the big drops standing out on his white forehead, and he was accordingly released.

"Now then," continued the rogue, calmly reseating himself, and with the packet of letters still kept cautiously in sight, "business, man, business!"

The banker seemed like a man whom the real life, no less than the color, had suddenly gone out of.

He burst into a hollow, mirthless, cackling sort of laugh.

"Oh, yes!" he said, in a weak, galvanized kind of tone; "that is the talk. Business, man, business! Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!"

The adventurer gave him a quick, critical look. It would hardly do for the old fellow to be shocked out of his senses just yet awhile. However, nothing more than the profundity of despair was apparent as yet.

"Do you know how I came in possession of these letters, my friend?"

Goldkirk was rousing himself back to life and interest with a powerful and sustained effort.

"No," he replied, more naturally. "How was it?"

"By robbing the Occidental National Bank," coolly. "I am the culprit."

"Ha!" fiercely, "and also the murderer, with the bank-watchman's blood on your soul."

Montalbert carelessly shrugged his shoulders.

"Say on my hands," he corrected. "I am in doubt as to that soul question. We are twofold, each of us; there is a dual existence in every life. But as for the soul? *Peste!* it is a knotty point."

The banker, who had now, after the first paralyzing shock, regained something of the nerve with which to face the misfortune, could not but gaze at the man with something of the wonder with which the latter had even inspired the veteran detective toward the last.

"Go on!" he exclaimed, after an exasperated pause. "What else have you to say?"

"But really, my dear Papa Goldkirk, I must proceed leisurely in this matter," continued Montalbert, gently. "Not that I may not safely defer these absorbing psychological discussions until I am your son-in-law—altogether *en famille*, you know. But I must arrange my thoughts with regard to these letters."

Goldkirk gritted his teeth, but managed to hold his peace and wait.

"My dear Papa Goldkirk," the other went on, smoothly, "what have we in these extraordinary letters? Let me at first recapitulate their history."

"Mrs. Markham, then Miss Crust, your sweet daughter's (my adored Blanche's) governess, had at last wearied of your persistent entreaties for her hand in marriage to that degree that she had thrown up her situation in disgust, and quitted the city."

"Your passion must have been of the deathless and abiding sort. At all events, you could not resist the temptation of writing to her. No answer."

"You wrote again, but your second appeal must have been penned under confused circumstances. To say that Miss Crust was surprised when she received this second epistle is doubtless but mildly to indicate her emotion."

"In fact, it wasn't your letter at all, but one newly received by you from a former and fugitive associate in crime, recalling in detail the history of a series of stupendous forgeries by which you had got your early start in the banking business which you have since prosecuted so successfully, and for which the writer had accepted the ignominious part of scapegoat—becoming a proscribed exile, with the sole stigma of the crime upon his name and fame, for a stipulated consideration at your hands."

"This letter was from Montevideo, where the writer still lives, under the assumed name of

Castro, on the income which you yearly pay him as the price for the double ignominy which he is complacent enough to bear alone.

"It was the miscarriage or failure of one of those payments that had invoked this threatening and circumstantial letter from him to you. Doubtless intending to destroy it when about to mail your second epistle to Miss Crust, you got things fatally mixed. You must have destroyed your newly-written letter to her, and sent her the incriminating letter from Castro by mistake. Am I right so far?"

"Yes!" was the harsh admission.

"Good! Discovering your mistake when too late, the remainder of your correspondence with the bored young lady was of a decidedly different tone. No more love-making, no more protestations, no more tear-blurred entreaties to name the happy day—at all events, no more of this sort of gush *per se*. "Return me that letter! only do this, and command my services, my heart, my purse. But return it to me, or I am lost, ruined, your task-slave to the end!" Such was the new epistolary burden.

"But our bored and persecuted little governess was no less shrewd of her advantage than independently scornful of a millionaire widower's hand and heart.

"She returned no answer, thereby tacitly refusing the new suit as steadfastly as she refused the first. Let me see; how do I stand, by now? Correct so far?"

"Go on!" was the banker's gloomy and by now restrained composed sole answer.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MONTALBERT'S TRUMP CARD.

THE adventurer continued:

"Well, I am near the end. In an evil hour for her, and on a piteously false assurance from you that *la petite Blanche* was at the point of death, the governess permitted you to persuade her to become once more an inmate of your house.

"But your verbal insistence was of no more avail than your penned effusions had been. You continued your entreaties both of love and for the return of the incriminating letter. In vain. She would not use it against you, but would retain its possession in sheer self-defense against your importunities.

"In this she was firm. Your passion turned to fear, and perhaps from fear to hate.

"You even committed fresh crime. You entered her room during her absence, broke open her trunk, and surreptitiously secured the letters—all of them, for those of your own following upon the misenveloped one were almost equally incriminating in the frenzy-prompted admissions of guilt which they contained.

"Miss Crust was furious upon the discovery. Little cared you. But, with the restoration of your sense of security, your hopeless passion revived.

"Your fresh importunities that she should become your wife at last stung her to madness, disgust taking the place of *ennui*.

"To squelch you the more completely, she at last declared the fact of her betrothal to your private-secretary. Infuriated with jealous rage, you drove the young woman from the house, and have since then been the couple's implacable foe.

"Well, Papa Goldkirk, I have about finished my interesting recital. Here are the missing letters—with one important exception, I must admit," with a singular smile. "What are you going to do about it?"

Goldkirk eagerly caught at the last but one of the concluding sentences.

"With one important exception?" he exclaimed. "Which one?"

"The most important of all—the Castro letter, I admit it."

"Ha! And where is that?"

"In the possession of the Markhams, I think. Perhaps you are not aware that they were on friendly relations with me—without guessing my true character, I must confess to their advantage. Well, Claude Markham, just before his flight, must have obtained access to the correspondence after it had come into my possession, and abstracted the master document of the pile. But this is only inference on my part, though a strong one. At all events, it is not with the others."

The banker drew a great breath of comparative relief.

"Rascal, I can still defy you, then!" he exclaimed.

Montalbert repeated that singular smile of his.

"Ah! how you jump at conclusions," he said. "The drowning man's clutch at the proverbial straw is hardly a circumstance, Papa Goldkirk, even had the master-letter ceased to exist, you are as much and indubitably in my power as ever."

"Pshaw! how?"

"The writer of that letter is still alive in Montevideo, as I said before, or was at last accounts."

"Yes, but," confidently, "beyond your reach or influence."

"Go slow. Castro is an Englishman."

"Granted; but what of that?"

"His real name is George Jelliffe."

"What of it?"

"He is my father!"

Goldkirk sunk back.

"I don't believe it!" he said, hoarsely.

"It is none the less true, and can be readily proved," was the composed answer. "Miscellaneous rogue as I am—bank-robber and murderer into the bargain, if you choose—I, Judson Jelliffe, rascal-at-large, am the only son of George Jelliffe, rascal but once in his life, and then in your partnership, and still a stipulated exile in non-extraditional Uruguay in your pay."

"Perhaps he doesn't regard me as much credit to him. Who knows? But blood is thicker than water. I may have to hunt him up."

"No, no! no need of that. We—we can probably settle this thing."

"Of course we can. And look here; I shall take it on myself to get back that one letter from the Markhams. I don't like the idea of their retaining it much more than you do."

"Old Grip was there yesterday for that purpose, and without success."

"A fig for Old Grip! He won't trouble you further."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say."

"But where is he?"

"Disposed of."

"Good Lord! you haven't murdered him, too?"

"Papa Goldkirk, be content with a main fact, without being over-inquisitive as to particulars. As your prospective son-in-law, I calmly advise it."

The banker winced afresh.

"Well, well," he said, assuming his brusque business tone, "then we are of one mind in this affair, and I suppose I can safely leave it in your hands."

"Exactly," and Montalbert put the packet of letters carefully out of sight. "I'll take care of everything. That part of it is settled. Now, my dear sir, call in the adored Blanche without further delay."

Goldkirk turned ghastly once more.

"What for?" he faltered.

"Do you forget that our betrothal awaits your paternal blessing?"

"Heavens and earth! but you can't really mean it, Montalbert?"

"Can't I?" with fleeting sternness.

"Oh, my God! the idol of my heart, and to betroth her to such as you—an infamous scoundrel—a self-confessed robber and murderer?"

"Peste!" airily. "But I am impatient, old boy. What more fit betrothal—the first scoundrel of the age to the *forger's* daughter? Moreover, I sha'n't make the girl a bad husband. There is a *chic* worldly vein underneath her nonsense that I rather take to. However, all this is neither here nor there. Hurry up, Papa Goldkirk!"

The banker buried his face in his hands and shuddered.

Montalbert sternly laid a hand on his shoulder, and then his quick ear detected the swish, swish of rustling silken skirts descending the stair.

He stepped to the door, opened it, and looked out.

"Blanche, my love!"

"Yes, Henri!"

He took her in his arms, kissing her, as they drew into the library together, while Mr. Goldkirk started wildly to his feet.

"Blanche, my angel, we are in better fortune than I had hoped. Your father not only consents to our union, but is overjoyed at the idea. Dear and esteemed sir! we await your paternal blessing."

"Oh, papa, how real good of you!"

And, without noticing his frightful pallor, Blanche stood with bowed head, her hand in her lover's, before the tortured banker.

The latter would have broken down completely under the crucial test, but that the adventurer's warning and merciless eye was upon him.

He muttered some incoherent words, kissed his daughter's forehead, and then pretended to hunt for a book among the library shelves while the betrothed pair, chatting gayly, quitted the room.

Mr. Goldkirk did not give way to impotent fury or despair when he found himself alone.

He was beyond that point.

He simply resumed his seat, with his head bowed upon his breast, in a species of ghastly reverie.

When he looked up again, even Montalbert would have been uneasy at the look that had come into that drawn and pallid face.

What was the new expression that was so startling? Hope or murder? At all events, it was a new and desperate resolve of some sort.

And, without a muttered word, the man passed out of the room silently and methodically on his daily business.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BETROTHED LOVERS.

THAT evening Count Montalbert was a dinner guest at the *maison Goldkirk*, and it was

generally understood throughout the numerous household that Miss Goldkirk and he were engaged.

A new and expensive ring glittered among the numerous costly ones on the young girl's left hand, her engagement-ring, and both she and her lover were in the highest spirits, while "Papa Goldkirk" dissembled so skillfully that even Montalbert was more or less deceived.

"Papa," cried Blanche, when the dessert was on the table and the servants had been dismissed, "two or three important events must be decided upon forthwith."

"Of course, my love," was the smiling response. "But what are they?"

"In the first place, I must have an engagement ball."

"Ah, by all means!" interposed Montalbert, with his gay laugh. "What were an engagement without *le grand bal*, love without frivolity, beauty without her dance? As well a Hermes without his caduceus, a Comus minus his mask! Yes, yes, Papa Goldkirk; an engagement ball or death!"

"Henri, if you dare laugh at my suggestions, I shall be seriously angry!"

But her face was flushed with happiness none the less.

"Oh, of course!" assented the banker, easily. "Why not? Of course you shall have what you wish, my dear."

"Of course—*il va sans dire*! And then there is the wedding, you know."

"Tut, tut! but the day isn't fixed, my dear."

"A formality that should be attended to at once," cried the adventurer. "Adorable Blanche, that is your divine privilege."

"I shall decide it by to-morrow, Henri," with a fresh blush. "But that needn't defer our consideration of the affair. Papa, it must be just magnificent—unapproachable!"

The banker nodded indulgently.

"With all my heart, *petite*. But wait!" with comical consternation. "There is one thing we haven't thought of yet."

"What is it, papa?"

"Why, Henri, being a Frenchman, may also be a Catholic."

"Set your minds at rest, my dear friends," said Montalbert, easily. "I am a Protestant."

"How odd that I've never thought of this before!" cried Blanche, laughing a little disappointedly, it would seem. "But I've no objections to the Catholics, you must understand."

"If that could only be known at the Vatican!" said her lover, with mock earnestness.

"There you go again, monsieur!" pretending to frown. "But I shall take you in hand some day."

"Only speed the day, *petite*, and I am content."

"Incorrigible! But really I do like the Catholics. Their service is so impressive, and by long odds they have the best choir music in the city. Besides, Henri, are not all the *haut noblesse* rigid Catholics?"

"Not quite, my love," stroking his mustache with much gravity. "It was the Edict of Nantes—or the abrogation of it; really I have forgotten which—that marked the financial ruin of my conscientious ancestors, who happened to be Huguenots, you know."

Mr. Goldkirk burst into an hysterical little laugh, which he hastily cut short, though a little too late.

"Excuse me, my children!" he said, contritely. "I was, unfortunately, thinking of something else."

"Oh, papa! thinking of something else, with my wedding-day and Henri's ancestors under discussion?"

"Bah!" interposed the adventurer, also laughing. "*Cut bono*? Weddings are serious enough affairs, to be sure. But as for ancestors, *pouf*! The world wags, it is a democratic age, and rank is but the guinea-stamp, and a *that!* *Vale* aristocracy! *vive le plebiscite*."

"Oh, you shall have the wedding—when the day comes!" said Mr. Goldkirk, quite genially, but with some impatience. "But you really must excuse me, as I have a pressing business engagement down-town this evening." And, as he rose, with less than half his accustomed bottle of port finished, he gave the adventurer a meaning look, which was responded to by a scarcely perceptible nod.

"Fie, papa!" and Blanche took a pretty little forefinger at her august progenitor. "Business engagement, indeed? Yes, your odious club business, as usual. I know!"

Mr. Goldkirk seemed to be swallowing something with difficulty, and then managed to laugh lightly.

"But can you complain, my love," pausing to touch her bright head with his hand, "when I leave you in your darling count's company?" And he made his escape.

Two hours later the adventurer, after a most enjoyable *tête-à-tête*—enjoyable to Blanche, at all events—kissed his youthful *inamorata* good-night, and set out direct for the banker's down-town rooms at the top of the bank building, with which he had already been made familiar.

To his surprise, instead of the colossal negro janitor responding to his summons, the door was opened by Mr. Goldkirk in person.

"Why, what is up, Papa Goldkirk?" he playfully demanded, while they stepped into the elevator together. "Don't you find this a trifle *infra dig*? And what has become of your uniformed master of the gates?"

The banker pulled the cord, and laughed a little angrily.

"The overgrown rascal!" he exclaimed. "He insisted to-night that he must go to his wife's sister's wedding, or something of the sort; and, as there were really no special festivities on the carpet for this once, I was weak enough to indulge him."

"What! none of our accustomed *bon vivants* for this occasion, eh?"

"No; but even our set can't be expected to jubilate every night in the year, you know. But we can talk over matters all the more enjoyably for that, you must know."

The sumptuous upper hall showed but a dim light as they stepped into it, but the handsome *buffet* room into which Goldkirk quickly introduced his guest was nicely lighted and warmed, with wine, cigars and the *et ceteras* awaiting them, as if for the most comfortable of chats.

"You are really looking decidedly youthful, my dear count!" was the banker's initial greeting when they were snugly bestowed at last before the cheerful grate-fire of cannel coal. "Never saw you in higher feather, to tell the truth. Love-making must agree with you."

Though somewhat suspicious of the apparently unaffected geniality of his host-victim, as the banker might be called, the adventurer made no sign to that effect.

"It always did," he smilingly replied, stretching out his irreproachable legs to the genial blaze, and critically sipping the fine wine that had been poured out for him. "And with such a little angel as Blanche—ah, my friend!" with an ecstatic gesture; "how odd that such an old hunk as you should have brought her into being! Capital sherry this, by the way. *Corru-na*!"

"No, Amontillado, and of the best. Ha, ha, ha! Hunks, eh? How old are you yourself, my friend?"

"Thirty-nine."

"What! and I shall only be four winters the senior of my own son-in-law?"

Then they both laughed, as pardonable liars upon this point of age are apt to do, after which the banker said:

"But now let us get down to business, my dear fellow. When shall you visit the Markhams?"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

EDGE AGAINST EDGE.

BEFORE replying to his host's suddenly serious query as to when he intended visiting the Markhams, Montalbert, as we shall continue to call him for convenience, finished his glass, replenished it, lighted a cigar, and then, after a deliberate study of the fire, looked up and smiled.

"Shan't you seek out the young couple at all?" cried Goldkirk, in real or feigned surprise at his companion's wiliness. "Why, man alive! the missing letter *must* be recovered, you know."

"Oh, that's all right! Don't worry! Of course, I know. But"—with another smile—"Papa Goldkirk, I want to be sure of you first. See?"

"No, I can't say that I do, at least not very brilliantly," somewhat doggedly. "In fact, I should think you'd find me to have accepted the situation submissively enough."

"Ah! a little too submissively. There's the rub, my beauty!"

"What more can you want or demand?" a little savagely. "Perhaps," sarcastically, "if we chanced to be Mormons, and I had two or three more daughters, you would want them, too!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" the pleasantry seemed to tickle the adventurer immensely. "Ho, ho, ho!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" with increased savageness. "Glad you take me so jocosely, I'm sure. Quite a vein, I suppose, that you inherit from your Huguenot ancestry of the *haut noblesse*? Ho, ho, ho!"

"Oh, come off, Goldkirk, and don't be such an unmitigated ass!"

"For that matter, my lord count, I'll measure my ears against yours any day."

"And your wits, too, perhaps?" with a searching look.

"No; excuse me. I am not obtuse to my limitations in such a competition, I trust."

"I'm not so sure of that. In a war of edge against edge—or diamond cut diamond, as the triter saying is—I shouldn't make the mistake of holding you cheap, at all events."

"Here is my trouble, Goldkirk, in a nutshell: You accept your fate too readily. It isn't natural or human. You overdo the thing."

"You are mistaken there. You will certainly grant, however, that the totality of my submission to the yoke you have forced upon me, if honest, makes it convenient for you?"

"Yes—if honest."

"Rest content, then," with profound earnestness, or its perfect simulation. "Shall I give you my new stand in a nutshell, too?"

"Yes."

"It is this: Much as I love my daughter, I love my honor, my reputation, my respectability more. There you are!"

"Ah!"

The adventurer's eyes were upon his face as if they would read his inmost soul.

"Montalbert," still more earnestly, "it is true! It was a bitter, bitter struggle you forced upon me," with emotion—"bitterer, doubtless, than you can conceive of from your victor's standpoint! But you conquered, and my submission is none the less sincere because so thorough and abject. Believe me in this, I beg of you. My hope in my child is buried and done. She is yours. And, if the decision makes me your victim, not the less does it make *you* my confederate in saving what remains of my honor. Pitiably as this confession may be, it is honest. Will you believe this?"

"Yes, by Heaven!" with an oath; and the adventurer forthwith stretched out his hand, which the other emotionally seized. "I sha'n't ever be too hard on you, Goldkirk; and it's to be hand-in-glove with us from this time out."

"I am really glad to have overcome your lingering suspicions at last," said the banker, touching his glass to his companion's. "And—and, Montalbert, you—you will treat the child kindly when she is yours?"

"Trust me for that!" heartily. "She is a little trump, and I never yet was unkind to one of her sex."

It had been head against head, edge against edge, but it could not, save in the evolution of events, be certain which side had won.

"I shall trust you," Mr. Goldkirk went on to say, quite simply. "And you will not find me niggardly. Blanche shall bring you a dowry of a quarter of a million, and you shall have twenty thousand a year to start housekeeping with, or go abroad, or live as you choose. Will that do?" a little timidly.

Montalbert's black eyes sparkled, and he smote the table with his strong hand till the glasses and decanter jumped.

"I should say so!" he cried, jubilantly. "Papa Goldkirk, you are a brick! By the way, Blanche has fixed the day."

"Eh?"

"Yes," complacently; "the first of December, which is also her nineteenth birthday."

"The deuce! a little hasty, isn't it? However, I sha'n't complain."

"That is good of you. And, my dear sir—I'm deuced hard-up at present, humiliating as it is to confess it."

The banker produced his check-book with the most perfect imperturbability.

"How much?"

"A couple of thousand, if you don't mind."

"Don't mention it. But," passing over the filled-out check, "I say, Montalbert?"

"Thanks!—Well, Mr. Goldkirk?"

"Those abstracted funds, you know—Ha, ha, ha!—swag, as it might be called?"

"Yes?"

"Twenty thousand in cash, together with sixty thousand in bonds, if I remember aright?"

"Correct. And perfectly intact as yet—just where I know it is."

"Ah! I only thought, or rather wondered, you know—"

"Why I hadn't dipped into it as yet, eh? Very natural you should. But the stuff is too fresh to handle, my good sir; and I am by nature discreet, I may say very discreet. All in good time."

"Ah, of course!"

And then for a few moments, even with the shadow of his own early crime hanging over him, the banker fell to marveling in a dreamy way how he should be there discussing the subject of his own bank's robbery—or, at all events, the bank of which he was the trusted president and a chief stockholder—with the man who had perpetrated the deed.

Montalbert was the first to next break the silence.

"As for the Markhams," he said, reflectively, "I shall seek them out to-morrow afternoon."

"Good, good! You are sanguine," hopefully, "of securing the Castro letter from them?"

"Absolutely certain of it."

The banker rubbed his hands together feverishly.

"I wish I could feel as confident of it as you!" he exclaimed.

"Be at ease. I shall return from Whippoorwill with the telltale epistle in my possession."

"And you will bring it here—here with you at once, and at this hour, say eleven? I shall await your coming with confidence, eh?"

"Yes," slowly. "I will at least exhibit it to you here, say to-morrow night, at this hour."

"Ah, that will be well, that will be excellent! You see I am naturally nervous, Montalbert, until that infernal letter is back in my possession."

"Say *our* possession," corrected the adventurer, dryly.

"Of course, of course! just the same! You won't forget?"

"No, no; be easy."

"What! must you be going?"

"Yes." Montalbert was already on his feet, reaching for his overcoat. "It is late. Don't you accompany me?"

"No, not further than the lower door, to say good-night. I must remain awhile to have out my smoke and think."

Having seen his unwelcome guest to the street, Mr. Goldkirk remained standing at the foot of the elevator shaft for a moment, rubbing his hands softly, his lips moving.

"He will be sure to come back to me with it," he feverishly muttered. "He is confident of it. Yes, yes; I shall receive him here once more, and be sure that he has the letter, alone—all alone in this great, hollow, empty building—alone, alone!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WHIPPOORWILL AGAIN.

EARLY in the afternoon of the following day Montalbert was driving over the road between Chappaqua and Whippoorwill.

The region was wholly new to him, so that he had to inquire his way more than once, but it was not difficult, he had secured a good horse, and at last, after less than an hour's drive, the lonely old crag-backed farm-house, as it had been more than once described to him, was reached.

Maud Markham was there to receive him, and he did not attempt to disguise his consciousness of the comparative coolness of her greeting.

"Mrs. Markham," he said, with grave frankness, or what was an undetectable counterfeit of it, "I have learned from Old Grip that the entire truth as to my detestable past career is at last known to your husband and yourself."

"Do not imagine then that I repine, or even find it in my judgment to blame you for the necessary consequence, in that I can never more be to you both what I once was."

"Far from it. But I am here now now on a life and death mission in your interests."

"Dare I then hope that I may be permitted to speak with your husband, no less than with yourself, with the least possible delay?"

Maud hesitated. And yet there was a seeming warmth and even pathos in Moresby's manner that won upon her.

"Wait here, Mr. Moresby," she said. "I will send for Claude, though I cannot answer for his consent to meet you."

Leaving him in the parlor of the old house, she disappeared.

Moresby was a keen reader of character, motives and thoughts.

"These parties have not got that letter," he said to himself, alone. "That is patent at a glance into the woman's noble face. Now what shall I do?"

The case of the missing Castro letter was just this:

Just prior to his visit of that morning upon Mr. Goldkirk, Moresby had gone to his place of concealment for the bank plunder and other valuables, for the purpose of getting the package of letters. On looking over them, he discovered to his astonishment and consternation that the gem of the heap—the Castro epistle—was no longer with the rest. A hurried, followed by a careful and methodical, search, above and aloft, everywhere, in fact, had failed to bring the missing document to light. It was then, in the impression that Claude might have taken the liberty to abstract it, that he had gone to the banker's house, half-shotted, as it were, and yet with sufficient formidableness to secure a partial victory, as we have seen. But he felt, and none better than he, that his victory could not be deemed as absolutely secure without the recovery of that master-bomb of his magazine, so to speak. Goldkirk would be sure to demand its production, and would doubtless rightly construe a failure to produce it as a confession of the one remaining vulnerable spot in his adversary's armor. Besides, had he not confidently promised to produce it on his return from the Whippoorwill retreat?

Now, since his few minutes' conversation with Maud had satisfied him that his suspicion of Claude's possessing the letter was without foundation, what was he to do?

At last he set his teeth hard, and smiled in his iron and quietly resolved way.

"There is but one course," he said to himself. "That is, to bluff it out with Papa Goldkirk, at all hazards—pretend to have it and yet refuse to show it; and to alarm the Markhams into pulling up stakes and drifting further off into the heart of this tree-and-rock wilderness—or anywhere out of the way, for that matter, so that Goldkirk at all events shall lose track of them, should he take it into his head to seek a secret corroboration of some of the yarns I shall be bound to tell him. This is the only course, and it shall be pursued."

Soon after coming to this determination, Moresby heard steps approaching the back of the house, and then Maud returned, accompanied by her husband.

"After what you know of me, Claude," said

the adventurer, rising and inclining his head with an admirable assumption of painful embarrassment and reserve, "I shall not even expect you to touch my hand again. But I do thank you deeply for granting me this interview. It shows," with emotion, "that you cannot even yet regard me as absolutely, unrelievedly treacherous and base."

Claude Markham was somewhat affected, in spite of himself, though he managed to dissemble the feeling pretty effectually.

"Sit down, Mr. Moresby," he said, with as much indifference as he could command. "Maud has told me what you have already said to her; so that you won't have to repeat yourself, at all events."

The adventurer obeyed, and in the few minutes' conversation that followed became confirmed beyond a doubt in his first impression with regard to the couple's ignorance of the missing letter.

At last Maud, who had been manifesting symptoms of impatience, burst out with:

"But what of Mr. Crimmins, the detective, Mr. Moresby? What is your last news of him?" while Claude looked up with equal eagerness.

The adventurer at once surmised that the fact of Old Grip's disappearance had already been communicated to them, and governed himself accordingly.

"That is one painful subject that I must speak of," he replied, in a voice and manner of the profoundest concern. "The detective has disappeared."

"Disappeared!" from both in a breath. "But when? how? What is the explanation of it?"

Moresby shook his head gravely.

"I only wish I knew," he said, knitting his brows. "Mrs. Crimmins went to see Mrs. Griscom about it yesterday morning. She was almost frantic."

"Yes; she has written me a line to that effect," Maud admitted. "But it was quite incoherent. We merely gathered the fact as you have stated it, and have been anxious for the particulars."

This was true, Luella having sent the notification under Old Grip's instructions, on the shrewd assumption of the very visit that was now being made to Whippoorwill by the adventurer in Goldkirk's interest or his own.

"That is just the mystery of it," replied Moresby, gloomily. "There are no particulars."

"None whatever?" They seemed additionally anxious and alarmed.

"None. All that I know or can surmise about the matter is what Mrs. Griscom told or tried to tell Mrs. Crimmins, who unfortunately, was little better than beside herself with grief and anxiety."

"Crimmins had visited me at my rooms by appointment on the last night that he was seen, it seems. We did not agree in the business that was between us, but separated amicably, indeed with hearty good feeling on both sides."

"This was at or about midnight. I remember hearing him regain the street and walk briskly away, after which I did not give him another thought."

"If the detective is dead," in a hushed, painful voice, "it may be that I am the last friend who saw him alive."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE CLOVEN FOOT.

"DEAD!" echoed Maud. "Old Grip was hardly the sort of man to disappear or die and make no sign. I cannot believe it!"

"Neither can I!" exclaimed Claude, decidedly.

"Well, now," interposed Moresby, brightening up, "to tell the truth, that is just how I feel about it myself. In fact, I called upon Mrs. Crimmins just before quitting the city to day, and did my best to impress her with this feeling. But she was inconsolable—accused me of knowing more than I professed of her husband, and all that sort of thing. I did the best I could, but it seemed of no use."

This, so far as his visit and attempted condolence were concerned, was the truth; Luella having played her part to such perfection as to completely deceive him.

Both Maud and her husband were perceptibly agitated over what they had heard.

"Poor Mrs. Crimmins!" exclaimed the former. "They were both here with us day before yesterday." Moresby looked up apparently in great surprise. "I never before met such a sweet woman, or one who impressed me so lovably at first sight. And Mr. Crimmins also; he was everything that we could wish. Oh!" falteringly; "if he be indeed lost to us, I don't know what we shall do."

"Hold on, my friends!" cried the adventurer, with seeming impulsiveness. "It may be that I can help you out in this seeming embarrassment. In the first place, can you guess the chief motive of my errand here to-day?"

No; they shook their heads; and it was, moreover, sufficiently evident that the confidence that had once existed between the couple and the adventurer was a thing of the past.

"I shall have to tell you, then, as a preliminary," continued Moresby, with a well-simulated look of shame-facedness, "that it is well enough you two have broken with me. I will say it frankly, if self-contemptuously, I am body and soul against you, and in the Goldkirk interest."

"You say it to our faces, at all events," cried Claude, bitterly, while his wife's lips were compressed. "There is that much in your favor—such as it is!"

Moresby submissively bowed his head, the seeming shame-flush deepening in his dark cheeks.

"Reprobate me as you will," he said, in a low voice. "I deserve it all—I attempt no defense."

"Still, I must give my own reasons for my baseness, in order to prove to you at least that I am not here altogether in that man's corrupt interest, but also to give you a warning of his fresh hostile intentions with regard to yourselves."

"I wanted Old Grip to promise neutrality in my designs upon the hand and heart of Blanche Goldkirk, the banker's heiress. He refused point blank. That, in point of fact, was the subject on which disagreement hinged at our last meeting. Bravo for the detective! is your verdict, as a matter of course. Well and good; I echo it—in the purely personal sense."

"In the worldly sense, I have no longer the occasion to regret that disagreement."

"I have cornered the banker in his den at last, and with my unaided strength."

"His daughter is already my betrothed wife, and with his tacit approval; or rather, let me say, without his daring to disapprove."

He paused.

"You must have got hold of those letters at last," suggested Claude, with a sneer.

Moresby gravely bowed.

"You are right," he said, without exultation.

"That is the secret of my success. How I came by the letters, I am not at liberty to state. I, however, recognize them as Mrs. Markham's property, and they shall be restored to her accordingly—after my nuptials with Miss Goldkirk, which are to take place the first of December next."

When everything was taken into consideration, the seeming frankness of the adventurer could not but in a great measure commend itself to the young couple.

There was much in his admissions which he might safely have omitted, and with obvious advantage to his own figuring in the affair. And if it occurred to Maud that she might secretly warn her former pupil of the sort of man she was intending to marry, not the less did the seeming openness of Moresby impress her in his favor.

"We are to understand, then," she said, after a pause, "that you have agreed to second Goldkirk in his continued persecution of my husband and myself, as in some sort the price of his consent to your marriage?"

"That is it in a nutshell. But that I do not intend to live up to the detestable agreement, I think you will both presently discover when I make the true cause of my visit here apparent."

"Thanks in advance!" coolly. "But why the agreement at all, let me ask, if your possession of the incriminating correspondence has been sufficient to enforce his compliance with your wishes, as you but just declared, or implied?"

It was a shrewd question, but Moresby, with his accustomed cleverness, was equal to it.

"Pardon me, Mrs. Markham," he replied, smiling, "but I neither declared nor implied that my possession of the correspondence had proved an all-sufficient means to that end."

"Oh!" doubtfully.

"No; and, to tell the truth, the banker might still have been disposed to defy me, at least to an embarrassing degree, but for my pretended advocacy of his persecutions against you, as an additional stop to the Cerberus of his indignation."

"Not with the Castro letter among the rest," persisted Maud, confidently. "He wouldn't have dared to defy that!"

Moresby's sole reply was a regretful and deprecatory gesture of the deepest respectfulness.

"But why any more of this?" exclaimed Claude Markham, impatiently. "What fresh devilry on the part of that hound is it that you claim to be here to warn us against, Moresby?"

The adventurer had not come altogether unprovided for this side game that he was playing.

If the cloven foot was still cunningly concealed, not the less was he determined that it should triumph here as elsewhere.

He drew a newspaper from his pocket, and, without a word, indicated a marked paragraph.

Both Maude and Claude read it at the same time, and then dropped the paper in despair.

"He's at his work again!" exclaimed Markham, hoarsely. "The villain! the cowardly devil! is there no hope to escape him?"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

"NO REST FOR THE PERSECUTED."

THE newspaper item was only one of many, similarly inspired by Goldkirk's money and malice, which, until within the past fortnight or so, had continued to dwell from time to time upon the disappearance and possible guilt of Claude Markham, the banker's whilom private secretary, in connection with the noted bank-robbery, which was still fresh in the public mind.

This form of persecution had not only been largely instrumental in prompting the young man's flight from the city, but had also constituted one of the most poignant bitternesses of his enforced seclusion.

The present item was even more alarming than its predecessors, inasmuch as, after the usual reference to the crime and the dark stigma of suspicion that was still declared to rest upon the fugitive's name, it for the first time hazarded a shrewd conjecture as to the locality of his place of hiding.

This referred to "a wild region of Westchester county, a few miles northeast of Chappaqua, not far from the Connecticut State-line, and in the vicinity of which the skulker's wife, formerly a Miss Crust of unknown antecedents, was understood to have been born and bred."

As for Maud, she was for some moments speechless after reading this cruel and cowardly paragraph.

Then she quickly rose, with quivering lip and the pallor of renewed anguish, but with even an increase of her accustomed quiet energy.

"We must go on," she said, simply. "Come, Claude, we must fly hence, and without delay. Like the wicked, it seems that there is no rest for the persecuted. No rest, no rest, no rest!" she repeated, desolately, even while already calculating bestirring herself for a fresh move into the hidden and, it was to be hoped, into the unknown.

"Outrageous as it is, there is no other recourse for you!" cried Moresby, savagely. "By the God of heaven! it is almost too monstrous for belief. But as soon as my attention was attracted to the item—but an hour before reaching the train, and accidentally at that—I felt that your last chance for security in this retreat was at an end."

"And you," interposed Claude Markham, in a hard, dry voice, "were doubtless as certain as we are now that the item, like its predecessors, was contrived and inspired by Mr. Bank-President Goldkirk, your future father-in-law and present confederate?"

"God help me, yes—that is, I couldn't doubt it!" stammered the adventurer. "But," eagerly, "don't forget that I am here to warn you in time! Leave me that mite to my credit, Claude!"

"Oh, yes!" he was helping his wife with their few and simple preparations. "I sha'n't forget this last kindness, Moresby," drearily. "It shall be remembered to your credit."

The adventurer sprang to his feet.

"But look here," he cried, quite desperately, "sha'n't I be permitted to help you out in some way? For instance—don't be angry, I beseech!—do you want any money?"

Claude shook his head and appeared to be giving little heed.

"Where shall you go?" Moresby cried, again.

"Oh, we'll manage," replied the young man, with an indifferent shrug of the shoulders. "By a sort of good luck, it happens that I was born just over the border in Connecticut yonder. And there are as wild and unfrequented rocks over in the Nutmeg State there as hereabouts, I fancy."

"That will be well. The detectives and reporters will at least have more trouble in hunting you up in a different State."

No reply was made.

The simple preparations were soon made.

Half an hour later, the house was locked up, and the rest-seekers were seated in their light wagon, with their stout Canadian pony eager to be off up the steep rocky road to the eastward, and the greater part of their personal baggage stowed behind them.

The cow was to be left behind, it was true, but there was fodder and water to spare in her pasture-lot, and they might succeed in getting a price for her at one or another of the lonely milk-farms they would necessarily pass.

They would have liked to see Moses, the Hermit, before going, but he had been mooning somewhere off in the hills all day, and there was no time to look him up now.

"Good-by, Mr. Moresby, and thank you!" Maud called out. "We sha'n't forget."

Claude uttered something to the same effect, and away they rattled up the stony road.

Moresby remained by the road-gate, silently and motionlessly watching them until they had disappeared over the rise.

Then, as if possessed by a sudden paroxysm of furious self-contempt, he stamped upon the ground and shook his clinched hands in the air, raving forth incoherent oaths, epithets and disjointed words.

"What infernal madness and idiocy is this?" he exclaimed at last, while slowly recovering his self-control. "How strangely I have loved

those two, and how my heart, or what decency may be left in its blackness, goes out to them now! No matter," with a last oath and stamp of the foot; "Goldkirk shall be brought to book for it all, curse him! or there is no virtue in the thumb-screw of blackmail."

He hurriedly led out his hired horse, climbed into the buggy, and, with scowling brow and set teeth, set out on his return drive at a break-neck pace, notwithstanding the dangerousness of the road.

He had not proceeded far, however, when a shrill, sharp whippoorwill call rung out so startlingly from a hemlock clump he was passing as to cause his horse to swerve and rear.

He pulled up just as a giant and wild figure—the figure of the Wild Shoemaker of Whippoorwill—sprung into the road, waving one hand wildly, and with the other clutching his long tripod of a stick.

"Behold!" shouted the apparition, with weird solemnity of mien. "It is written, man of blood, it is written that thou mayst read!"

And he pointed with his forked stick to a broad-sided rock, half-hidden by the thicket-border, upon which was blazoned in fresh red letters the words: "VENGEANCE IS MINE, AND I WILL REPAY!"

Bold and fearless as he was, the adventurer, who had never seen nor heard of this strange wanderer before, had to confess to being not a little startled at first, though he quickly burst into an angry laugh.

"Who the deuce are you?" he roared; "and what do you mean by startling my horse in this scandalous manner? Scarecrow! out of my road, or I'll lash you out of it!"

A derisive eldritch laugh was his response. "Son of Belial! wouldst scoff at the Lord's prophet?" screamed the Hermit. "Behold again! for it is written, man of blood, that thou mayst read."

He pointed again, this time across the road, to another rock-face, inscribed with the letters in blue: "WHAT AVAILETH A MAN THOUGH HE GAINETH THE WHOLE WORLD, IF HE LOSETH HIS OWN SOUL?"

"Out, I say!" cried Moresby, half-beside himself, and snatching the whip menacingly out of its pocket. "Shall I have to tell you again?"

Up went the lash, but in the twinkling of an eye, and before it could descend, one of the Hermit's long, wind-mill-like arms reached into the buggy and tore him out of it as if he were no more than a wooden effigy, while the horse, gripped by the bits, was brought to a stand with such a tremendous jerk, wrench and twist combined that he seemed fairly paralyzed with impotence and fear, and could only stop still and tremble like an aspen.

CHAPTER XL.

THE ADVENTURER'S SET-BACK.

FOR the first time in his life Jud Jelliffe, *alias* Moresby, *alias* Montalbert, *et al.*, the fearless and champion master-rogue, experienced what Old Grip himself had once experienced before him—how utterly impotent and helpless he was in the grasp of Moses Crust, the Wild Shoemaker of Whippoorwill.

True, he had the advantage of his detective predecessor in there being no giddy Devil's Gorge near at hand, but, muscular and agile as he was, he was no more than a doll in that gorilla-like clutch.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Hermit. "Ho, ho, ho! How are the mighty cast down, and how are the lowly exalted!"

"Curse you!" snarled Moresby, still retaining his presence of mind; "you shall pay for this!"

By this time he did not doubt but that he was being tackled by a most dangerous and irresponsible escaped lunatic.

Managing to wrench his right arm free, after a moment of deceptive quiescence, the next instant his revolver was clapped against his antagonist's side, and discharged.

Not, however, before the Hermit had evaded the bullet by a lightning-like twist of his supple and snake-like frame.

Then, still shouting forth his pious quotations and injunctions, Moses fairly shook his victim like a rat, and at last, looking up out of his helplessness, Moresby beheld a spectacle that might well have appalled the stoutest heart.

The professional canvas-bag, which Moses carried upon his person as a soldier would his haversack, had become disarranged, so that its contents, newly-captured serpents of all sizes and different kinds, were swarming out over his neck, head and shoulders in the most startling and hideous manner conceivable.

"Help! help!" shouted the adventurer, probably for the first time in his varied and checkered career.

Luckily, the pistol-shot had quickened the pace of several countrymen who happened to be driving in the direction of the scene in a lumber-box wagon, drawn by two horses.

They now put in an appearance, and in obedience to their cries, Moses released his victim, after first snatching the revolver out of his grasp.

Moresby was pale, but collected.

"Help me seize the fellow!" he called out, while the Hermit ha-haed and ho-hoed to the top of his hollow voice afresh. "He must be an escaped madman."

"Oh, no, sir, he isn't," laughed one of the new-comers. "He be pairfectly harmless, be old Moses Crust."

"Harmless? I'd like to know what you call dangerous then!"

But Moresby had caught at the name. "Crust?" he repeated. "Is that this wild man's name?"

"Yes, sir," one of the others went on to explain. "He be Moses Crust, the snake-catcher, or, as we mostly call him in these parts, the Wild Shoemaker of Whippoorwill. Ben't that so, Moses?"

But the Hermit, having returned his snakes to their confinement, had relapsed into a quiescent attitude, and was now regarding the group with a dreamy stare.

"Give the gentleman back his popper, Moses," called out one of the men. "No wonder he drew it on ye in his startlement, but he wouldn't use it ag'in' ye now, I'll be bound."

The adventurer had by this time brushed some of the road-dust from his garments, and was pretty well alive to the meaning of the situation.

The Hermit indifferently tossed back the weapon, and then, folding his arms, began to spout Scripture in his disconnected and rambling way.

Moresby thanked the new arrivals for their timely interference, and then drew a little apart with the more intelligent-appearing one of the party.

"Is the wild man's name Crust, did you say?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, Moses Crust; and he have been a roamer and text-plasterer through old Westchester and hereabouts in Whippoorwill longer than I can well remember."

"There was a young lady, a Miss Crust, also from these parts, I believe?"

"Oh, yes, sir! that were Miss Maud who has lately opened the old Haunted House again back up yonder."

"Thank you!"

Moresby then lost no further time in clambering back into his carriage, whose horse had for a wonder abstained from running away, and driving on, after leaving a dollar with his informant for the purpose of treating himself and companions at the most convenient tavern.

However, his horse was now somewhat forward and balky.

He had not proceeded more than a mile at an exasperatingly slow pace, before he was startled afresh by a solemn voice enjoining him to "repent or be damned" almost at his very ear, and there was the indefatigable Hermit of the rocks stalking at the side of the carriage with long swinging strides.

A sudden idea occurred to Moresby.

Pulling up, he turned amiably to the Hermit, who also came to a pause, and extended his hand.

But Moses only stared in his wild way, and waved the proffered hand to one side.

"Between the Lord's prophet and the man of blood there can be no good will!" he exclaimed, impressively.

"How do you know that I am a man of blood?" asked the adventurer, quietly.

"To the prophet of the Lord nothing is veiled," replied Moses, sententiously, but in his vague way, as if addressing himself to invisible multitudes rather than to any one in particular. "And what is writ is writ."

"You should not have treated me so uncere-moniously, friend. I had newly separated from your sister Maud and her husband, with whom I was once most friendly."

A more human interest leaped into the staring and grizzled face.

"I know, I know!" cried the Hermit. "What is there unknown or obscure to the prophet of the Lord? From mine eagle's eyrie upon the lofty rock did I view them wander away, the weary, the unresting, the persecuted ones. Man of blood, it must have been thy deed, or the deed of thy companion devil, the banker-fiend. Beware! beware!"

How could the wild man have divined this? Moresby, though the most incredulous of mortals, began to feel a superstitious thrill.

"Friend, you are mistaken," he said, with forced calmness. "I still hold those hapless two in good-will."

Without replying by other than a shake of his weird head, Moses lifted his gaunt arms on high with a grand and impressive gesture.

"Beware!" he repeated loudly. "Man of blood, thy fate, the retribution of Heaven, is upon thee. How bravely thou goest forth out of this, God's wilderness, into the great city, man's mighty hell. But thou goest to thy death. Not another sun shall shine upon thee in thy life and pride. It is written. Repent, repent!"

And, with a last flourish of the gaunt arms, a last glare of the fiery eyes, the Wild Shoemaker of Whippoorwill darted into a roadside thicket and was seen no more.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE HERMIT'S PROPHECY.

LONG after this adventure, even when he was comfortably re-seated in the smoking-car of the city-bound train, Moresby-Montalbert found himself dwelling upon the incident with gloomy and persistent distaste.

"What could the crazy giant have meant?" he repeated over and over to himself. "Even the ancient writers, as I have read in the strange old works they have left, believed or affected to believe that the insane were vested with the gift of prophecy. And how, moreover, could that ragged hill-tramper have known of my connection with Goldkirk—so recent at that—without an unearthly intuition or divination of some sort! Bah! I must be growing flighty myself."

He lighted a fresh cigar, and strove to interest himself in a magazine article, but in vain.

Then he accepted an invitation from a trio of well-appearing young fellows to make up a eucher party, but with no better success than before in driving away the haunting unpleasantness.

Even the semblance of gambling—formerly a ruling passion with him—could not dissipate the vision of that gaunt, ragged, John-the-Baptist-like roadside apparition, nor prevent those hoarse, seemingly prophetic words from ringing, knell-like, in his ears.

It was not later than dusk when he reached the city, with a badgered, self-contemptuous feeling, and still with that adventure haunting him with a persistence that would not be denied.

Hours must yet elapse before he would be expected with his report in the luxurious retreat at the top of the bank building.

He ate a hearty dinner at the restaurant of the Grand Union Hotel, and then, sauntering to his rooms, engaged himself in an elaborate improvement of his toilette.

Should he not go for a love-chat with Blanche Goldkirk?

No; the thought was as distasteful as anything else that could occur to him.

At last, in order to consume two or three hours, he headed for the nearest faro hell.

It was years since he had been familiar with games of chance.

Indeed, not the least of the contradictory strengths that went toward the making up of this remarkable character was an iron resolution which had enabled him to shake off completely both the gambling and drinking habits, each of which in its turn had bade fair to drag him to perdition in his earlier years.

But now he played as a last resource, for oblivion, for forgetfulness, if possible, of those hateful last prophetic words that were ringing and thrilling through his mentality like a death-bell chime.

He played like a madman, without sense or system, and, as is so often the case with blind luck, as it is called, won steadily, persistently and without a break.

The red and white ivory counters grew into a formidable pyramid before him, and a stack of coins and bank-notes were equally eloquent as to his good-fortune in the matter of side-bets.

The other gamblers gave up their play in order to become the silent, wondering spectators of this outwardly collected, dark-browed, iron-jawed, handsome man, a stranger to most, "buck the tiger" with a cool disregard of the possible unsheathing of the avenging claws and an unvarying success that challenged their admiration no less than their envy.

It was what is known as a square game; that is, one in which the bank's percentage is a legitimately extortionate one and where the players have a faraway ghost of a chance against it.

At last the dealer ceased operating the cards, and, as the phenomenal "bucker" looked, made a smiling but significant sign.

Montalbert had broken the bank.

He rose mechanically, cashed in his checks and pocketed his side winnings—a total of something over ten thousand dollars—with the methodical precision of an old hand, and strode out of the hell in a sort of dream, with the Hermit's solemn words still murmuring in his brain their wild enunciation:

"Thou goest to thy death! Not another sun shall shine upon thee in thy life and pride. It is written. Repent, repent!"

It was not far from the midnight hour, and he had not heeded or cared to heed that he had been followed from the dealer's table by a trio of well-dressed but sinister-visaged, desperate-looking men.

As he was still threading the lonely, deserted cross street, with the intention of securing a hansom or *coupé*, suddenly and silently they fell upon him, "billies" or loaded canes in hand.

But they had mistaken their prospective prey.

The haunting fear-words vanished into air, and the inborn bravo in the adventurer's nature—as betokened by "the assassin's eye, the gladiator's heart"—was to the fore as if by the touch of a warrior-enchanter's wand.

He wouldn't have used his revolver in any event.

Swiftly, silent as the three-fold attack itself, a long, keen poniard glittered in his hand; he seemed to avoid the raining and brutal blows as if by a sort of writhing, gliding, serpentine intuition; at the same time an activity of supernatural deadliness seemed to animate his powerful frame from crown to toe, the knife flashing and falling murderously and with the rapidity of as many succeeding lightning-strokes.

In less time than has taken to tell it two of his assailants were bleeding and senseless on the ground, and the third was limpingly taking to his heels, hand on hip as if a trail of blood might be likewise marking his flight.

A grim joy filled Montalbert's breast as, bending over the nearest of the prostrate men, he indifferently wiped his dagger upon the fellow's garments and returned it to its concealed sheath in his bosom, himself unscathed.

The haunting words had gone, probably to return no more—dispelled forever, no doubt, by the shock of murderous and triumphant contention—and the adventurer was himself again.

"To the deuce with prophecies!" he muttered contemptuously. "Man of blood I may be—gad! it would be waste of breath to deny it just now, I fancy—but, if this is the doom that was predicted for me, I rather think 'another sun shall yet shine upon me in my life and pride.'"

Wholly indifferent to the motionless desperadoes at his feet, as to whether the breath of life might be in them or not, he strode to a neighboring street-lamp, where he carefully inspected his person to make sure that not a tell-tale spot or sprinkle of blood had marred his immaculate exterior.

Satisfied upon this point, he glanced at his watch, strolled leisurely, humming an operatic air, to the nearest Broadway corner, and, signaling a disengaged cab, sprang lightly into it with the necessary instructions.

Twelve of the night—"the witching hour of night, when churchyards yawn"—was just being boomed solemnly forth from the steeple-tower of grand Old Trinity when, having dismissed his cab and rung the bell, the side basement door of the Occidental Bank building was cautiously opened, as on the preceding night by Mr. Goldkirk himself in response to the adventurer's summons.

CHAPTER XLII.

ON THE THRESHOLD.

MONTALBERT was in a high state of satisfaction with himself, while the banker was antithetically reserved and moody, though apparently well in hand and good-naturedly expectant.

"Have you secured the missing letter?" was the latter's eager first question, in a low, anxious voice, the moment they were in the basement together.

"Ay, that have I, my beauty!" was the jovially mendacious response, as Montalbert lightly stepped after him into the elevator cabinet, which straightway, at the touch of Mr. Goldkirk's hand upon the controlling cord, began its noiseless, gliding rise through the vast, gloomy emptiness of the shaft. "But a truce to shop-talk at present! I am buoyant as a bird just now, and must have my priming of that glorious old Amontillado of yours before I ever think of aught else."

The banker smiled strangely in the imperfect light, but made no immediate answer.

He, also, had some cause for feeling in a somewhat improved humor with himself.

He had that day received a letter from Montevideo announcing the sudden death by apoplexy of Jelliffe, otherwise Castro, his erstwhile partner in the crime which had been the *cauchemar* of his subsequent life.

This not only relieved him of further hush-money in that direction, but, with that one ill-advised threatening letter back in his possession, would preclude the possibility of Montalbert securing fresh incriminating evidence of a personal nature as to his former crime, as the adventurer had indirectly menaced when so unexpectedly declaring himself the son of the expatriated man.

"What!" cried Montalbert, gayly; "you are once more your own master of ceremonies, I see."

"Yes," replied the banker, shortly.

"Another wedding spree on the part of our sable colossus, eh?"

"No, no! but the rascal was solicitous enough for another night off—probably the after-effects of the nuptial festivities, you know. Ha, ha, ha!—and I didn't object, seeing that our business might still be performed to the best advantage in private—in the strictest privacy, for that matter."

"Yes, yes; to be sure!"

And then, a few minutes later, they were once more in the sumptuous and cozy buffet-room, the cheery candel coal at their knees, the table with its festive burden between them.

"You are late!" commented the banker, impatiently. "I expected you much earlier."

"Oh, you did?" and Montalbert eyed him curiously, while helping himself to the sherry and lighting a cigar.

"Yes," still irritably. "You don't mean to say that you have only just returned from that hole up in Westchester?"

"Why, no, Papa Goldkirk!" still curiously, though with imperturbably good humor; "I don't mean to say anything in particular!"

"But where have you been since your return thence?"

"Playing faro, and bursting the bank," laconically.

And then, laughing lightly, the adventurer, to the wonder of his host, began emptying his various pockets of his winnings, until the table, or such of it as wasn't occupied by the salver and its contents, stacked high with bank-notes and coins, chiefly gold—an opulent and tempting pile.

Goldkirk—who had a morbid horror of Chance, notwithstanding his secret and persistent worship at the shrine of her kindred divinity, that of Bacchus—looked on in mingled amazement and pleasure.

"Bless me!" he exclaimed. "Why, Montalbert, you must be the very pet of Fortune!"

"Never had much to complain of the old girl's treatment," was the smiling admission.

"But all that money! How much is there in the heap?"

"Not much. A trifle over ten thousand at a rough count."

"Ten thousand! And you burst the faro bank, you say?"

"Clean as a whistle!"

"And how long did it take you to acquire this great sum?"

"There was the rub," discontentedly. "You see, five hundred was the stake limit—a bagatelle! As a consequence, I was nearly two hours in making them cry *Peccavi*. No gambling worth the trouble this side of Monte Carlo!"

Goldkirk's amazement continued.

"Ten thousand dollars in two hours!" he exclaimed.

Then, turning his eyes resolutely away from the attractive heap, a peculiar expression of reserve came into his face, which was not lost upon his quick-witted companion.

"Don't be uneasy, Papa Goldkirk," said the latter, reassuringly. "My gambling, like my drinking, days are long dead follies."

The banker looked up with a start. It is always more or less startling to have your thoughts divined before being uttered; though the adventurer's penetration was only half-through in the present instance.

Montalbert laughed heartily, while tossing off and replenishing his glass in the airy way that distinguished him.

"Don't be alarmed, I tell you!" he repeated.

"Diab! save an occasional *penchant* for a horse-race, my wild oats are sown and reaped. It isn't among such follies, *mon beau père*, that your distinguished son-in-law will make your money fly when *la petite fille charmante* is his."

The banker seemed to swallow something with difficulty, as was his occasional habit when sorely pushed, though he did not make the mistake of giving way to his irritability again.

"You are a little out, Montalbert," he said, pleasantly. "I wasn't thinking just then of that; or at least, not altogether."

"*Pardonnez moi, monsieur!* And what else then, if I may be allowed?"

"This is what struck me," said Goldkirk, smiling. "Why you should care to marry my daughter for her money is what I can't understand, when you have the nerve and ability to make such *coups* at the gaming-table. It is incomprehensible to me!"

"It needn't be," coolly. "It is you now that are 'out,' and altogether out, in your premises."

"How so?"

"In the first place, I don't care to marry your daughter for her money, but—for *yours*."

"Oh!"

"Yes; I like the girl, you see. Why, Papa Goldkirk, your freshness surprises me. In fact," laughing, "it never seems to tire of furnishing me with new little surprises."

"Ah, indeed!"

"Exactly."

"But how so?"

"Why, bless your refreshing simplicity, Papa Goldkirk! do you think I would burden or bore myself with possessing the girl if I didn't like her, when I could have all your money I want on demand just as well without as with the girl?"

"Oh! ah! humph! Pretty good! I had almost forgotten. Ha, ha, ha!"

"In the next place," continued Montalbert, "you are out to a still greater degree. Chance is a treacherous mistress—a capricious jade! Such *coups* as mine of this evening are no commoner than for lightning to strike hand-running in the same place. Blind luck stood by me to-night, where cooler and more methodical play might have drained me to my last *scudi*. So there you are, Papa Goldkirk!" complacently.

CHAPTER XLIII.

INTO THE MYSTERIES.

GOLDKIRK, who had sunk into a sort of irritable reverie, suddenly looked up.

"You said you had got the missing letter?" he abruptly demanded.

"Right!" lazily.

"Well, well!" rubbing his hands feverishly; "that isn't bad, Montalbert."

"Should say it wasn't!"

"Why don't you show it to me?" Goldkirk burst out at last, almost beside himself with impatience.

Montalbert laughed indifferently.

"Look here, Papa Goldkirk, that's a pretty important letter—by far the most important of the whole pack."

"Man alive! do you think I don't know that?"

"But I couldn't help impressing it on your mind, you know."

"I don't want it impressed—good God! there is no need," cried Goldkirk, half-frantic.

"Besides," continued the adventurer, reflectively, "when a man goes to great trouble and pains to secure a valuable prize, you know, he is naturally jealous of its possession. Now your own experience ought to bear me out in that."

With a deadly look, which it was a misfortune for Montalbert that he failed to notice, the banker sprang to his feet and began to pace the floor like a caged tiger.

"Why don't you exhibit the letter to me?" he cried, wildly. "You promised you would! How am I to know that you are not deceiving me—that you really have secured the letter, if you won't show it to me?"

Montalbert, under his careless demeanor, was anxiously considering.

Of course he couldn't exhibit what he didn't have, and his chief concern was to retain the banker in the belief that he was in possession of the letter in the teeth of his necessary failure to provide it.

Fatal miscalculation! How near might the Hermit's prophecy be already to its fulfillment! Undreaming as to the coils of his own unconscious weaving, the adventurer had overstepped the threshold of his fate in crossing the sill of that far-down basement door, and his next blundering, though seemingly well-advised, step might carry him on, beyond, into the mysteries the solution of which it is not given to any man to make!

"Really there is no hurry about this matter, Papa Goldkirk," Montalbert drawled out, after a tantalizing pause. "The letter is no longer with your enemies, but with me, Montalbert, your friend, your idolized daughter's husband." He laughed again. "Think of that, and be content."

Goldkirk suddenly wheeled upon him in a white wrath.

"Are you going to show me the letter," he cried, chokingly, "or are you not?"

The adventurer looked at him with sudden suspicion and surprise.

"I don't know whether I am or not," he replied, bluntly.

The banker seemed to master his rage by an immense effort.

"All right!" and he plumped himself down in his easy-chair afresh. "Of course you won't show it to me, simply because you haven't got it to show. This is the truth I have been fishing for all along," contemptuously, "and I am satisfied at last—though not with numerous false nibbles at the hook, I must confess."

This would never do.

"What!"

And Montalbert burst into a derisive laugh which, under cooler circumstances, Goldkirk would have perceived to be forced.

"Oh, yes!" with assumed unconcern; "you may try to laugh it off in that way, but it won't go down with me."

"Oh, Papa Goldkirk!"

"The detective was right from the beginning. The Markhams did not have the letters—never had—not one of them—and you were doubtless not long in discovering the truth."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look you—you Jelliffe!" with sudden change of tone and manner which caused the adventurer to wince in spite of himself; "I have been a coward and a fool. Even your half-power over me is fictitious."

"Humph!" and Montalbert assumed his cold, hard tone. "Better not tempt me to prove it real."

"But a half-power, after all! Without that Castro letter in your possession (your present attitude, or I don't know what I am talking about), I could afford to defy you."

"Fish! you would not dare, even then."

"Wouldn't I? And what other string would you have to your bow, pray?"

"My blood relationship with Jelliffe, *alias* Castro, for one thing, since you persist in following out your absurd hypothesis. Montevideo and a paternal confession are far away, but are not unattainable."

The banker burst into a contemptuous laugh. "Read that!" And, producing a letter from his pocket, he tossed it over the table.

Montalbert read it with genuine consternation for the moment.

"Dead?" he exclaimed. "Castro—my father—dead?"

Goldkirk coldly took back the letter, and returned it to his pocket.

"Bowstrings are sometimes like fiddle-strings," he sneered—"liable to snap when least expected!"

But the adventurer had already recovered his sublime assurance, with every one of his faculties sharpened and alert.

"Pshaw!" he said, with such admirably-assumed indifference and *ennui* as to deceive the banker afresh.

"The dead are dead, and the world is for the living—and the strong. The old story of the survival of the fittest; the old age-long struggle, in which the strong win and the weak go to the wall. You infernal, senile, self-sufficient old fool!" with scathing disdain. "All the letters are in my possession!" he produced the packet, which somehow, at least to the banker's distempered imagination, looked a shade thicker than before. "Here they are!" he flourished them contemptuously under the other's nose, while still keeping a firm clasp upon them. "But do you imagine I would be such an idiot as to trust the gem of the lot—the key to your worldly and social damnation—into those eager, trembling hands of yours? All here, I repeat! Down on your knees, and sue for mercy! Or I shall be tempted to forget that you are the father of the girl who is presently to be my slave, no less than yourself." And, with a harsh, dry laugh, he picked up the decanter with his disengaged hand to pour himself some more wine.

Goldkirk had turned ghastly pale, after which he recovered himself so completely as to be almost smiling.

He was nervously flipping in one hand his delicate gold tooth-pick, which suddenly, as if by accident, flew out of his hand with a snap to somewhere behind the table and the great easy-chair in which the adventurer was lolling back, his perfectly trowsered legs spread easily to the grateful canal-coal blaze.

"Do you hear?" cried the latter, looking up with his insolent sneer while balancing the glass to his lips. "What have you to say for yourself?"

"A moment, just a moment!" was the perfectly natural and rather obsequious reply. "My toothpick!"

He got up hurriedly, and went behind his guest stooping, his eyes bent peeringly toward the floor, while the other, tilting back his head, slowly ingurgitated the wine.

Suddenly and silently Goldkirk rose behind him, in his hand, not the toothpick, but a heavy short-handled sledge-hammer—deliberately appropriated from a plumber's kit in the bank cellar, and concealed there under the table hours before—on his face a terrible expression.

Crash! fell the heavy weapon, crushing in the entire back of the victim's head.

The adventurer struggled to his feet, but only to drop lifeless, and again and again the deadly hammer rose and fell.

He had gone to his death in his life and his pride, and the next sun would not shine upon his confident crest.

The Hermit's prophecy was fulfilled.

CHAPTER XLIV.

OLD GRIP AGAIN TO THE FORE.

AT noon of the second day following upon the tragic incident of our last chapter, Old Grip, who was by this time feeling pretty well recovered from the poisoning he had received, and who was, moreover, heartily tired of the rigid seclusion he had practiced, in order to keep up the impression of his death on the part of the adventurer, of whose taking off he could not as yet have the slightest intimation, was treated to several surprises.

In the first place, Cheese-it made his appearance at luncheon with a settled gloom upon his impish and eerie little face.

"Nothing new yet?" he replied to looks of inquiry from both Luella and her husband. "Laundry stopped again; all hands clamoring for their pay; Mrs. Griscom still absent; Peters declares that Moresby's rooms are still empty, his bed not having been slept in for two nights. Mystery in *statu quo*."

The mystery, as thus outlined by the boy, was now in the second day of its existence, with no signs of a possible solution.

Old Grip and his wife exchanged hopeless glances.

"You saw Peters, then?" asked the detective.

"Yes, boss," replied the boy. "Dick Moresby and he have been mooning about the work-rooms all the morning, trying to talk hopefully to the girls, the Chinamen and the rest, but to mighty little purpose, seeing as how they don't seem to believe what they preach."

"Did you ask him the question I gave you?"

"Oh, yes, boss! I had forgotten. He told me to say that you might put in an appearance there, he thought, without the slightest chance of encountering Moresby, and in that way giving away your secret."

"Ah! so he is under the impression that Moresby has for some reason taken alarm and cut his stick, eh?"

"He doesn't seem to know what to think, boss. But then, I'm sure he feels pretty certain that we've seen the last of the boss swell for some time to come."

"Has he ventured to call on Goldkirk yet in search of information?"

"Not yet; he thought it better to wait and consult with you first."

"What does the engineer think?"

"He won't say one way or another. Sly and mum as ever."

"Humph! that is a young man that I must take in hand."

Accordingly, Old Grip accompanied Cheese-it to the laundry building directly after lunch.

The machinery was all at a standstill, and a number of the employees, mostly hard-working young women, were hanging disconsolately about the doors, giving the place that forlorn and desolate look of an extensive and suddenly shut-down employment which has theretofore furnished a living to a large number of persons.

Sad as the case was, Old Grip could offer no encouragement to the many anxious and inquiring pairs of eyes, some of them with a distressingly hungry look, that were turned upon him.

Leaving Cheese-it at the main entrance, he made his way through the silent and deserted first-floor ironing-room to the office, where he found Peters and the engineer making a rather melancholy lunch off a pitcher of beer, with some crackers and cheese.

Peters jumped to his feet and cordially grasped the detective by the hand, but the engineer stolidly continued his lunch, scarcely so much as looking up.

Old Grip signed the former to silence, and then planted himself in a seat directly facing the younger man, whose face and build he critically studied.

"You are not Moresby's brother any more than I am!" he presently said, with startling abruptness.

The young man looked up with a slight start, but without losing his composure.

"You say so," he grunted, with his mouth half full of cheese, and turning out a fresh glass of beer.

"But are you?"

"No!" after a deliberate pause, punctuated by the draining of his glass.

"Are you any relation to Moresby?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"His half-brother."

Then the engineer, who was something of a cool card in his way, calmly masticated his last mouthful, finished off the pitcher, and, putting his hands on his hips, faced his interlocutor with a resolute look, which was also not without an element of sturdy frankness.

"Look here, Mr. Detective," said he, "there isn't any particular mystery about me, whatever there may have been about Jud Jelliffe, my half-brother, who was the real and sole proprietor of this establishment, as he probably is still, if not dead, which I can hardly believe—not yet, at least. Now, until this mystery of his disappearance is cleared up one way or another, there are some things that I am willing to enlighten you on, and others that I am not. Now, with this understanding, cut away with your conundrums, if you choose. You'll find me either a parrot or a mule, as the case may be."

"Thank you for your frankness, at all events," said the detective, who began to like the young fellow. "I shall begin right away, then. What is your real name?"

"Dick Jelliffe."

"Henry Moresby, otherwise Judson Jelliffe, and you had the same father, then?"

"By different mothers. Correct."

"Tell me something about your father."

"Don't know much. Ran away from home when a boy. Henry came across me accidentally two years ago in London. Have been with him ever since, without knowing much about him. Last heard of my father in South America. Was living in Montevideo under assumed name of Castro."

Castro! The detective fairly caught his breath. This was, of course, his first intimation that the writer of the gem-letter of the longed-for correspondence and the father of Jud Jelliffe, *alias* Moresby, were one and the same. He also now began to remember some old police matters in connection with these names.

"Your father was George Jelliffe?" he continued.

"Ever heard of him having to cut and run from New York, years ago, for a series of forgeries?"

"Never knew he had even lived in New York."

"Have you any idea where your half-brother now is?"

"If I had, I wouldn't tell you."

"Do you think him dead?"

"Possible, but not likely."

"Do you think he might have taken some secret alarm and run away?"

"Don't think anything about it."

"Have you any idea of his movements for, say, two days past?"

"None. Had I ever concerned myself with his movements, he would have kicked me out of my employment, besides breaking my head."

"Have you any idea of Mrs. Griscom's whereabouts?"

"No more than I have of Jud's."

"Do you know where she lived?"

"No; nor does any one else know. She seemed to come from and go to nowhere. Was even more of a mystery in that respect than was 'Moresby' himself."

This was a truth, as Old Grip had already learned from Cheese-it.

"That will do, Dick," said the detective, after a pause. "I thank you kindly."

Something in his manner seemed to strike the young man agreeably.

As he was about quitting the office, he turned, hesitated, and then said:

"Look here, friend! I'll give you a pointer—one, and only one. Here it is: You'll never see the old forewoman, Mrs. Griscom, again, unless you see 'Moresby' again."

"What did he mean by that?" asked Old Grip, with a mystified air, when the engineer had disappeared.

"I'm blessed if I know!" replied Peters. "Dick was far deeper into the puzzle hereabouts than I was ever permitted to be; though Moresby trusted me considerably in certain ways."

"But tell me, Mr. Crimmins, shall you venture to interview Mr. Goldkirk?"

"Yes; this evening."

"I wish you would come with me now then. I've been harder to work on my own hook than these folks around here have any notion of."

"All right, Mat, my man."

Manchester Mat accordingly led him straight down into the cellar, and thence, after procuring a lighted lantern, into the bottom of the memorable pit, by a more indirect route, which included many sharp and unexpected turns.

The door leading into the tunnel was open, and the man continued to guide him on into this until they came to a point on the right-hand side where much of the masonry was freshly torn away, a pick, spade, crowbar and heaps of debris lying near the break.

"Your work?" asked the detective.

"To what end?"

"To discover Moresby's secret hiding-place for his bank plunder and perhaps other valuables."

CHAPTER XLV.

THE DETECTIVE'S FRESH SURPRISES.

THEN, in response to the detective's look of curious inquiry, Peters said:

"This thing demands a little explanation. About ten days ago, I was exploring this underground passage in Moresby's company (never mind for what purpose) from pit to river front, I being in the lead, lantern in one hand, short crowbar in the other."

"Suddenly I stumbled over an inequality in the ground, and went flat, retaining hold of the lantern, but the crowbar flying out of my grip."

"As the bar did so, I noticed that it struck, before falling to the ground, against the right side of the masonry at a certain point that gave back a strangely hollow sound."

"By Jupiter!" says I, scrambling to my feet; "there might be a concealed niche or chamber in there somewhere. It sounded that way."

"Moresby exclaimed, with an oath, that the idea was absurd, and he did so with such unnecessary vehemence that I turned to look at him."

"He was very stern and pale, besides being more or less agitated, and angrily ordered me to go on and stop my infernal nonsense."

"I obeyed, and thought little more of it at the time. But, Crimmins, the thing has been growing on me ever since I struck hands with you, and especially during the last two days."

"Well, here is the result—the evolution, as they would say nowadays—of the thought that has been haunting me."

Old Grip was at once intensely interested.

"Is this about the spot where the crowbar struck?" he asked.

"Somewheres as near as I can recollect. But you must remember that I had no ruling object in making special note of my bearings at the time. As yet, I haven't had the slightest encouragement in my work, as you perceive. It may be within a few feet of here, and then again I may be rods wide of the mark."

"But have you sounded the wall thoroughly?"

"Yes; all along. But somehow there doesn't seem to be any guide in that. Now this place that I have torn out sounded sort of hollow, but you see how I have been deceived. However, I sha'n't give up, but shall keep right on sounding and ripping out, if it takes a fortnight."

"That's the true grit. But aren't you afraid at times of being interrupted in your work by Moresby unexpectedly turning up again?"

"No," replied Peters, wiping his brow thoughtfully. "Of course, there would be short shrift for me in such an event, for he would kill me like a rat. But somehow—and the Lord only knows how, for I don't—I have an impression that Moresby isn't coming back again."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Old Grip, hopefully. "To-morrow or next day—just as soon as I have my next leisure—I'll come here."

and help you in this thing. I'm something of an expert in searches of this sort. In the mean time, you can keep right on on your 'own hook,' as you call it. And by the way, it wouldn't be a bad idea for you to take that little assistant of mine, Cheese-it, into your confidence. He could help you perhaps more than you imagine, and in the event of your making any discovery, he would know where to find me with a notification to that effect. What do you say?"

"Just the ticket!" cried Manchester Mat, brightening up; and accordingly it was so arranged.

A little later on Old Grip returned home, after leaving Cheese-it in Peters's charge with the necessary understanding.

"Another surprise for you, Edward!" cried Luella, holding up a letter for him. "And don't be angry because I have taken the liberty of opening it. I thought it might be from Maud Markham, seeing that it bore the Chappaqua post-mark."

The handwriting of the contents was as clear and beautiful as copper-plate scrip, but the substance was a queer jumble to the following effect:

"MISTAKEN BUT HONEST MAN OF VIOLENCE."

"Sir:—The wicked fleeth when no man pursueth. Ditto the persecuted and the wronged when the Man of Blood giveth the false alarm. Man of Blood in this instance Moresby. May God forget him in his hour of need. Eastward, eastward ho fareth the wanderers. God is great, and Moses Crust, the Wild Shoemaker of Whippoorwill, is his Prophet. Yesterday was the evil day. Meet me on the Rocks. Repent or be damned."

"MOSES CRUST, PROPHET OF THE LORD."

"A surprise, indeed!" commented the detective, turning the queer epistle over and over in his hands. "What do you make of it, my dear?"

"For one thing, that Moresby—probably shortly before his disappearance—has alarmed our persecuted couple into a change of retreat."

"That's it."

"For another thing, that we must look them up with as little delay as possible."

"Yes; when I have finished with Goldkirk—to-morrow morning early. But look here, dearie; I'd better go alone this time. You see, I have a notion that I might find it advisable to bring them home with me; and in that event you would wish to make ready for their reception."

"As you think best, Edward."

"Good little wife!" And he kissed her. "How could that old jigger, the Hermit, know my address, I wonder?"

"He might have got it from Mrs. Markham, to whom I gave it."

"True."

He then told her of his afternoon's work, and, directly after dinner, called at Goldkirk's magnificent residence, in the hope of catching the banker before he could be off for his private club-house at the top of the bank-building, or elsewhere.

"Mr. Goldkirk hasn't been in since breakfast," was the response of the footman at the door. "But if any one called for him I was to show him in to Miss Goldkirk."

So, not a little against his will, the detective was brought to the banker's daughter, who received him in the front drawing-room.

She was expensively and tastefully dressed, after her custom, but was looking so pale and miserable as to secretly shock her visitor.

"Oh, Mr. Crimmens!" she burst out, with scarcely any preparation; "you must know something of this mystery about papa and Count Montalbert."

Old Grip gave her to understand that he knew nothing of any mystery—about her papa, at all events.

She looked at him sadly and swimmingly for a moment, and then, with as much abruptness as had characterized her excited words, burst into tears.

CHAPTER XLVI.

GOLDKIRK'S ODDNESS.

As a matter of course, the detective was at once all sympathy, without forgetting the practicalness of the melting situation.

He soon extracted the source of the trouble from the weeping girl.

Not only had her betrothed lover, "Count Montalbert," strangely absented himself from her presence for two whole days, but her father, in addition to affording her no satisfaction on that point, had flown into an unwonted passion when pressed upon the subject, had, moreover, in her opinion and that of the servants, taken to acting so absent-mindedly and otherwise "queerly" as to seriously alarm her, and had not been home to his lunch or dinner in two days, sending district messages in lieu thereof to the effect that he was busily engaged elsewhere, and she must not worry.

"My dear young lady," said the detective at last, "here is something of a puzzle, I grant, but in the mean time let me advise you not to alarm yourself unnecessarily. Leave it all to me. I shall set out to find Mr. Goldkirk at once."

"Can you imagine where he is, Mr. Crimmens?" plaintively.

"Ahem! Well, miss, I think I can manage to find him, somehow."

"And my Henri—the poor, dear count?"

"Ah! well, you see, I can't answer as to that. Fact is, I've never associated with the nobility to any great extent."

"Oh, of course; what could I be thinking of?"

"However, your father might know something about his lordship without deeming it advisable to inform you. But don't worry, and just leave it all to me."

With such consolation as she might gather from this, the detective made his escape, and then made a bee-line for the bank building.

"Some connection between mysteries here, I am myself thinking!" he muttered to himself.

"What can it be, I wonder! Then it has struck me all along that, between his anxieties and his fast living, old Goldkirk might give way under the strain."

He at once noticed a difference in the demeanor of the negro janitor on the occasion of his being conveyed by that official to the festive summit of the towering pile.

From being jovial and garrulous, the giant had become moody, taciturn, secret, and all this in conjunction with a self-importance, almost insolence of manner, that was equally inexplicable.

As on the occasion of the detective's first visit, the banker was found to be in the midst of a Bacchanalian and artistic entertainment, along with the high-living associates of his symposiums no less reckless and profligate (in secret) than himself.

Somewhat surprised, or even startled at first, Mr. Goldkirk was not long in expressing his satisfaction that the detective should have come, and, as upon the last occasion, he consented to desert his fellow-merry-makers for a confidential chat in the private apartment adjoining the buffet room.

"Do you know, my dear Crimmens," said the banker, confidentially, "you almost shocked me at first."

"Why so, Mr. Goldkirk?"

"I believed, or half-believed, you to be dead," with an oddly vacuous laugh.

"Dead eh?"

"Yes; Montalbert (same as Moresby, you know—an infernal, blasted scoundrel, as I very near came finding out to my cost!) in some way gave me the impression that I would never see you again, at all events." And then Mr. Goldkirk rambled off into somewhat incoherent vituperations of the adventurer.

Old Grip had himself more cause to be shocked at the banker's changed appearance than with the cases reversed.

Blanche had not exaggerated as to her progenitor's oddities. His manner was distinguished by strangely sudden alternations of reticences and wildnesses, close-lippedness and garrulity; while he seemed to have aged five years since the detective had last seen him, to say nothing of his bloodshot eyes, fitful manner, slovenliness as to dress, and other evidences of sleeplessness and hard living.

"Well, I am all right, as you can see for yourself, Mr. Goldkirk," replied Old Grip, with an assumption of jocularity. "And didn't it strike you as a bit odd that Montalbert should have supposed me to be dead?"

"Yes, yes, of course; that is, perhaps so," feverishly. "I say, Crimmens, shan't we have a little wine in here all to ourselves, while the rest of my Clubbers are enjoying themselves in yonder—stupid, noisy fellows!" disgustedly.

"I beg you to excuse me on that point," said the detective, earnestly. "Besides, I shall not detain you more than a few minutes."

"Ah, well, just as you say."

"By the way, Mr. Goldkirk," pleasantly, "why do you have the Clubbers with you if you find them such a bore—as I should think you would have found them long ago, for that matter?"

"Let be, my friend, let be!" irritably. "A man must have some relaxation!"

"Mr. Goldkirk," the detective abruptly asked, after a slight pause between them, "where is Count Montalbert?"

The banker looked up with a startled, suspicious look, and then frowned.

"How should I know?" he cried, furiously. "Deuce take you, man! what are you here for, anyway?"

"To see what has become of both Montalbert and yourself," replied Old Grip, not knowing what else to answer. "Your daughter, Miss Goldkirk, besought me to make the inquiry."

The banker sprung to his feet and paced the floor wildly.

"I shall discipline that girl!" he fumed, with what was most unusual with him—a string of profanity. "By Jupiter, sir! she will drive me crazy. She—" He partly controlled himself with an effort, and resumed his seat with a confidential air. "I'll tell you what has become of that infernal rascal, Crimmens—that is, as far as I know," he continued, with comparative collectedness. "I have sacked him—sent him packing—fired and bounced him, as the slang saying goes! Ha, ha, ha!"

"What!"

"Yes, yes! Look you, Crimmens, you have doubtless suspected me latterly of being in the villain's power! Confess it."

"Yes; I have suspected it."

"And perhaps by reason of his having in his possession that accursed missing correspondence, eh?"

"Yes."

"It was true. But, my friend," triumphant, "that is a thing of the past! Imagine the play of Hamlet with the part of the Danish sprig omitted. That was just that scoundrel's case. A bolt was missing in his elaborate thumb-screw, designed for my special torture—an all-important rivet, as you might say."

"How?"

"The master-letter—the Castro letter—was wanting! Ha! imagine my sense of relief and freedom when that became self-evident to me. Ha, ha, ha!"

And yet there was something pathetically hollow and mirthless—at all events, the reverse of triumphant—in his laugh.

"Well, well; I can imagine that, sir."

"Ha! I should say so. And then, if you had seen how I bounced him! Lord! but he cringed and begged. But I was adamant, sir, adamant! It was my turn at the thumb-screw. See? Off he went flying—baffled, broken, defeated—curse him! But of course I can't tell Blanche this—not yet awhile, anyway. Now you've got the whole secret; and we'll crack the neck off a bottle of Mumm sec. Eh, my boy?"

But all this was the reverse of satisfactory to the detective, as we may well believe.

"But where did the man disappear to, Mr. Goldkirk?" he asked, without paying any attention to the vinous proposition.

The banker again sprung up in a rage.

"How the deuce should I know or care?" he roared. "Disappeared to the devil, for all I care! Good-night, sir, good-night! You interrupt me; I must return to my friends; I am the father of the feast. Ha, ha, ha!"

Old Grip at once rose to go, Mr. Goldkirk accompanying him to the elevator.

"Simpson," he said, with sudden good-nature to the janitor, "show this gentleman carefully out of the building."

"Oh, of course!" growled the giant, with an insolent indifference. "What else am I here for?"

CHAPTER XLVII.

WHIPPOORWILL.

"BUT what do you make of all this?" asked Luella. "Doesn't it strike you as very strange and suspicious?"

It was the morning after the detective's last interview with the banker, the result of which had been faithfully recounted to her, and Old Grip was making his preparations for another visit to Whippoorwill.

"I should say so," he replied. "But we must let the matter stand as it is for the present. When I get back we shall perhaps hit upon something new. By the way, my dear, should Cheese-it come from Peters with anything worth knowing, you are to send him after me with it *instantly*, unless I send you a telegram to the contrary."

"Of course, my love. But, one thing more."

"What is it?"

"I do wish you had left some word for Blanche Goldkirk, at least as to her father's condition! Perhaps he didn't go home at all, and she may have sat up all night for some word by you."

"Very likely. But what word was there for me to carry to the girl? Besides, don't worry. It's Montalbert she's far more anxious about than the old man; and, of course, I'm as much in the dark there as ever. Good-by, my darling! Shall try to get back to-night; but don't grow nervous if I'm detained."

He kissed her and was off.

Arriving at the "Haunted House" in the middle of the forenoon he found the place wholly deserted, as he had anticipated.

But he had hoped to find Moses, the Hermit, awaiting him somewhere about the grounds, and there was not a sign of him.

At last a farmer came driving along from the eastward, who proved to be not wholly impervious to inquiries.

"Yes, sir," said the man, "the young lady what was living here a spell, drove off two or three days ago. She was with a good-looking young feller, perhaps her husband, what I never see'd afore. They stopped at my house a spell, for I bought the cow they was a-leavin' behind. A purty decent grade cow she is, too; but I mought hev got her cheaper if I'd ha' knowed how hard-pressed the young lady was for money. But, durn the luck! them's just the chances a feller lets slip."

"Where were they going?"

"Don't know. They was p'inted fur Nutmegs; that's all I know. Haw, haw, haw!"

And the ornament to Westchester civilization whipped up his half-starved team and proceeded on his way, probably in search of fresh cow-bargains.

The detective, who never liked to lose time, was at a loss what course to pursue, until a thought suddenly recurred to him.

He ran some distance back up among the rocks, and, to the best of his ability, sounded the whippoorwill call which was one of the Wild Shoemaker's characteristics.

It was sufficiently loud and sharp, though somewhat indifferent as an imitation, but it was effective.

After several repetitions and pauses, there was something like an answer from far, far away up and off among the rugged heights.

Presently he reiterated the cry yet again, and then the answer was indubitable and more distinct.

Ten minutes later, the Hermit came rushing down the path with that silent and wonderful speed of his.

"Man of violence!" he said, with no little asperity of manner, "hadst thou been more prompt to my summons, thou wouldst not have been kept waiting."

"It wasn't my fault that your letter only reached me last evening, Moses," Old Grip replied. "When did you write it?"

"Two days before, though I did not post it until twenty-four hours later."

"Ah! well, we mostly receive letters as they happen to be posted."

"Still, my son, what is written is written; for so sayeth the Prophet of the Lord—which is I."

"Very likely. Whither have they gone?" But the Hermit seemed to be in one of his dreamy reveries—a state of exaltation, he might have called it.

"My son," he said, with solemn irrelevance, "that was a noble epistle that I dispatched to thee."

"It answered the purpose, my friend, as you can see that it has brought me here."

"It didn't strike you as anything like a piracy—a plagiarism, I hope?"

"What? your letter?"

"Yes, my son."

"Plagiarism of what?"

"Well, of Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians, for instance; or even of his more masterly Epistle to the Ephesians, we will say."

"Well, not exactly. In fact, my dear Moses, your epistle struck me as being particularly original."

"Ah! but how did it strike you as comparing with the sacred epistolary efforts I allude to?"

"Well, now, really, my friend, I am rather rusty in my Pauline lore."

"Still?" anxiously.

"Still, I have no hesitation in saying that, for pure uniqueness, your letter could knock either one of the Pauline epistles endwise."

The Hermit brightened up with childlike delight at this rough-and-ready commendation, whose humor was altogether lost upon him.

"So now," continued the detective, with a little pardonable impatience, "I hope you will be good enough to tell me where Mr. and Mrs. Markham are gone."

"My son, I can't—it isn't permitted."

"Why can't you?"

"Because I don't know."

"Oh, the deuce!" in unmitigated disgust.

"Never call on the devil, my son," earnestly, "unless you are a Prophet of the Lord, as it is my privilege to be. Otherwise, he mightn't like it. I once saw him, my son. He wore a cocked hat, and was sitting upon his tail to hide it, though the splay shape of his shoes gave away the fact of his cloven feet."

"Look here, Moses, what did you want me to come to you up here in Whippoorwill for?"

"Why, to guide you to our friends, my son, as a matter of course."

"But you just said you didn't know where they had gone."

"The Lord will be our guide, my son. This I do remember, that Claude once told me his native place was in the wild country over the State border, somewhere this side of New Canaan. Come, we will take up our search forthwith. It was for this that I sent for thee."

The detective ran to where he had left his horse and buggy at the roadside.

"Come on!" he cried, springing into the vehicle. "Get in, Moses! We shall lose no time."

But the Wild Shoemaker of Whippoorwill shook his head.

"A Prophet of the Lord," he said, "uses his own legs, not those of enslaved dumb beasts."

And proudly pointing to the eastward, he led the way up the steep, stony road, with prodigious, untiring strides that taxed not a little the powers of the detective's hired horse to rival.

It was a tedious and arduous journey for a dozen miles or so over a wild, broken, precipitous and sparsely populated region, and many inquiries for a long time resulted in no information as to the whereabouts of the fugitive couple.

Toward evening at last, however, they reached the little village of Mill Plain, just over the State line, a few miles southwest of Danbury, where the name Markham was found to be one of the old-time family names of the farming neighborhood; and finally persistent inquiry evoked the information that a young

couple, such as was described, had taken up their residence a few days before in a lonely little furnished cottage near a sequestered pond, a mile or two to the west.

The searchers found the house indicated just as twilight was closing down over the wild surrounding hills and woods.

Their approach had been noted, and both Maud and her husband came running out to meet them.

"Oh, Mr. Crimmings!" cried the young wife, her eyes brimming over; "we thought you might be dead. But you are with us once more, and there is still hope!"

CHAPTER XLVIII.

DAYLIGHT AHEAD.

"HOPE, indeed!" cried Old Grip, springing out of his buggy to return the couple's exuberant greetings, while Moses, apparently as fresh as a rag-weed after his long and unflagging tramp, looked benignantly on, both hands raised, his lips moving, as if bestowing a grand blessing upon the lost ones found; "well, I should say! and perhaps better than that."

"What can be better than hope?" they asked, smiling.

"Realization—in other and more metaphorical words, Daylight Ahead!" was the confident reply. "But look here, my friends, we are hungry as bears; or I can answer for myself, however stanch old Moses and my poor devil of a horse may feel."

"Come right in!" said Claude, beamingly, as he took charge of the horse. "Thank heaven! there is the wherewithal for the entertainment of both man and beast, little as we dared expect the happiness of this visit."

Even Moses was induced to go into the cottage, which proved to have belonged to a great aunt of Claude's, recently deceased, which fact had facilitated its being secured as a temporary shelter by the wandering pair.

After a plentiful but frugal supper had been disposed of, mutual confidences were interchanged, with the surprises consequent upon each.

"Moresby the robber of the Occidental, after all!" exclaimed Claude Markham, knitting his brows. "I could never have believed it! And then this murderous attempt upon your own life! The monster!"

"It seems almost like a hideous dream!" said Maud, with a shudder. "To think of our having been friendly with such a man! And yet—hesitatingly—the man really liked us. I can't ever believe otherwise, undesirable as it seems now, to have obtained the predilections of such a terrible being."

"It is true," observed the detective. "I believe in the sincerity of his prepossession for you two as thoroughly as you can. But there is no accounting for the contradictions of such a nature."

"A man of blood!" interposed the Hermit, in his impressive voice, for he had not neglected to inform them of his own experience with Moresby. "My prophecy hath been fulfilled. From his parting with me the man of blood went forth to his death! and what was writ was writ!"

No answer was made to this, though his hearers were necessarily more or less impressed by the solemnity of the words.

"Do you think that Moresby may be dead?" Maud demanded, of the detective.

"I cannot say," he replied. "You are both now possessed of all the information from which I can form any conjecture. I, however, hope for much from the development of this insane frenzy, moodiness, or whatever it may be called, that is seizing upon Goldkirk. And then, also, this search by Peters and Cheese-it in the underground passage may at any hour develop into something. But be of good cheer! The danger for you, Claude, at all events, seems to be a thing of the past. I feel it. You must return with me, both of you, to New York to-morrow. Luella is already prepared for your reception in our little home, and, if need be, you can remain with us there in continued seclusion indefinitely. Nothing like the solitude of a great city in which to lose or bury one's self out of sight and out of mind."

Claude hesitated, while his wife also looked doubtful.

"I am not certain as to this," said the former, "much as I appreciate the nobleness of your hospitable offer."

"That is the way I feel about it," acquiesced his wife.

It was finally agreed that the matter should be taken under advisement over-night.

Then, as evening was still but little advanced, with a fine moonlight at that, Claude Markham drove with the detective over to Danbury in his light wagon, that the latter might telegraph to his wife, and thus ended the eventful day.

The next morning a minor sensation was caused when it was discovered that the Hermit, who had compromised with his scorn of the effeminacy of human habitations by sleeping on the kitchen-floor, in lieu of the comfortable couch that could have been at his disposal, was found to have disappeared.

Then a little later on, Claude, who had been

early out of doors to look after the horses, came back with a broad grin.

"Moses has, at all events, not neglected to leave us certain reminders of his visit," said he. "Come out and see for yourselves."

The cottage, whose surroundings were scarcely less wild and picturesque than those of the Whippoorwill homestead, was environed by large numbers of huge rocks, overgrown with creepers, bare, large, small and of various granitic hues.

There was hardly one of these with an available flat-sidedness of surface which Moses had not taken advantage of for the conspicuous placarding of his various scriptural injunctions.

They were to be seen everywhere, if not quite so thick as the proverbial Vallambrosian leaves, at least largely suggestive of the patent-medicine advertisements that are such a disfigurement of so many picturesque resorts at home and abroad; or it looked, as Old Grip suggested, like a Salvation Army's battle-shouts suddenly and by some occult magic materialized into sign-boards, as an effective and multifarious warning to the persistently unrighteous for many a day to come, if not altogether wasted on the desert air by the out-of-the-way solitude of the place chosen for their manifestation.

"Poor Moses!" said Maud, laughing. "Crazy he may be, but no one can question the unselfishness of his strange freaks in the Scriptural direction, and I am sure his heart is in the right place if his poor brains may be wool-gathering."

Thereafter the Wild Shoemaker of the Whippoorwill was no longer a real or tangible existence for any of those who had come in contact with his strange personality in the course of our story. But, from the fact that his freshly-stenciled work is still to be met with occasionally on fence, bridge, rock and deserted out-buildings in the wild region bordering along either side of the State line,* the presumption remains that he is at this hour of writing still pursuing uninterruptedly his erratic course of proselyting in his crude and familiar way.

Neither of the young couple was yet decided as to whether the detective's hospitable proposition should be accepted or not.

But directly after breakfast a decision in the affirmative was happily expedited by the apparition of Master Cheese-it galloping into view on a fine horse, which looked little less than elephantine by contrast with its rider, along the narrow pond road connecting with the highway to Danbury.

"Hurrah!" cried the now-comer, bringing his fiery steed to a halt with the whoop of a cowboy in the act of painting a mushroom frontier settlement in the brightest and most convivial of vermilions. "The mystery's busted, boss! Pack up, and be ready for a triumphal march, Mrs. and Mr. Markham. I'm the humping tidings-bearer for this festive occasion; you hear me!"

And then he was off the horse in a jiffy, his impish little face fairly dancing with excitement.

"What's your news?" demanded Old Grip, with his customary peremptoriness. "Has Moresby turned up?"

"Not much, that I know of, but his secret swag-house has! Such a find, boss! Peters and me struck oil in the tunnel after dark last night. When I had hurried home with the news, Mrs. Crimmings had just got your telegram. There was a four A. M. train for Danbury; and here I am, right side up with care, and sound as a dollar!"

CHAPTER XLIX.

REVELATION.

"WHAT did you find in the tunnel?" asked the detective.

"Oh, lots! All the Occidental swag intact, for one thing. Moresby's diary, written out in full, and giving the closest details of that crime in particular, for another. Then there's a letter that must have escaped Moresby's attention, for it had slipped away down out of sight into a narrow cranny. Peters says it's mighty important!"

"A letter?"

"Yes, boss; a long one, full of Spanish words and phrases here and there."

"How was it signed?"

"Let me see; Peters read off the name to me. Castro—George Castro! that was it."

Both Claude and his wife had clasped their hands in silent gratitude.

The detective turned to them with his engaging smile.

"My friends," he said, "the daylight that was ahead is here with us at last! Now do you think you can accept my proposition?"

Their glowing faces were a sufficient answer; for the long night of their sufferings was at last paling in the soft glimmerings of the New Day.

Cheese-it further reported that but little of the contents of the criminal's unearthed treasure-house had been disturbed as yet, Manchester Mat having announced it as his determina-

*A fact.

tion to mount guard over the spot, revolver in hand, until such time as the detective himself should be on hand to order otherwise.

The abandonment of the new retreat was now hastened no less summarily than in the case of the old Whippoorwill homestead a few days previously, the entire party arriving in Danbury, en route to New York, a few hours later.

At Danbury a fresh dispatch was sent to Luella, the detective made the necessary arrangement for sending back his equipage to the livery man of whom he had hired it in Pleasantville, the Markhams were so fortunate as to dispose of their turn-out on the spot to advantage, an excellent dinner was partaken of at the hotel, and, two hours after that, the party were snug in the Crimmins New York flat, with Luella and Maud in each other's arms.

Then the detective was about to accompany Cheese-it to the laundry building without any delay, when a district messenger-boy placed the following note from Miss Goldkirk in his hands:

"Mr. CRIMMINS:—Come to me at once. Papa crazy at the bank building. Am perfectly distracted and don't know what to do. B. G."

Sending Cheese-it on to rejoin Manchester Mat, Old Grip tossed the communication to his wife, spoke a few words of explanation to his guests, and hurried away in obedience to the summons.

He found Miss Goldkirk in a terrible state of excitement, which no ministrations on the part of Mrs. Beckwith, the housekeeper, had been able to ameliorate.

In fact she was so distracted as to have forgotten to look pretty, with all the toilette neglect or violations that such a statement ought to imply, which is sufficiently eloquent of her unhappy condition.

The detective was not long in obtaining the gist of what was to be learned.

Mr. Goldkirk had not been home the preceding night; his actions had been more noticeably aberrated on the previous day; and now the news, freshly received from the bank, was that he had become raving mad at a meeting of the board of directors, necessitating his temporary confinement under guard in one of his luxurious private apartments at the top of the building.

"Think of it, Mr. Crimmins!" half shrieked the unhappy young woman. "My father—my father, with his spotless character, his unexampled respectability and social position, caged and restrained like a cheap madman, a common person!"

"Humph!" muttered the detective, half disposed to a lack of sympathy for the nonce; "rather like a decidedly uncommon person, I should say. —But," aloud, "you must really try to bear up, miss. He'll like enough get over it; and I'll do what I can for you."

"Oh, but the notoriety, the disgrace, Mr. Crimmins! And my Henri, my poor, dear count! not a word, not a sign of him yet. If he, too, should be lost, or crazy, or dead, or mad—"

But here the detective made his escape without further ceremony.

When near the bank, he met one of the banker's men-servants with whom he had made some acquaintance.

"The poor gentleman!" exclaimed the man. "But then they have got him to sleep at last. He is up in his private chamber in charge of Simpson, the big janitor, and the doctor thinks he may wake up in a less violent state. I am going now for another physician, for there is to be a consultation."

But scarcely had Old Grip, who was well known at the bank, reached the top-floor hall in the elevator, where the physician, a policeman or two, and a number of anxious bank officials, were gathered, before there were low moans heard to issue from the room in which Mr. Goldkirk had been placed under guard.

"A bad sign!" said the old doctor, gravely shaking his head. "The opiate was an extra-powerful one. That it has so soon lost its effect is bad, bad!"

"Goldkirk has been going it too strong of late," was whispered to the detective by Mr. Manly, the cashier, whom he recognized as one of the gayest and most persistent of the 'Clubbers' in the Goldkirk symposia. "Good Lord! it has been night after night with him, almost uninterruptedly, for months past. And, in addition to this, we have remarked some unusual strain on his mind, that may have been of a terribly wearing nature."

Old Grip sympathetically nodded, and looked without answering at the speaker—a short, thick-necked, red-faced, demijohn-shaped gentleman of middle-age, with crisp-curling gray hair, short-breath and a nose like a boiled beet—who, he thought, together with kindred spirits of the Daffodil Coterie, might safely apply some of his criticisms to his own case.

But at this juncture the most startling scream, shouts and cries, together with a confused, scuffling sound as of men in mortal struggle, burst suddenly from the chamber in which the bank-president was confined.

This was in an instant accompanied by furious or terrified oaths in the negro's voice, after which he was heard to roar out:

"Help! help! He is mad, he is killing me! Help, help, for God's sake!"

Followed by the others, the detective had been the first to spring to the door, only to find it secured on the inside; and the other entrance to the apartments, including the large folding-doors, were found to be equally stubborn.

"A crowbar, or a hatchet, some of you!" cried Old Grip, sternly. "Or wait!"

Retiring a few steps, he suddenly precipitated himself, shoulder foremost, like an avalanche against the barrier.

Lock, latch and bolt yielded as if by a thunder-stroke, and literally torn from its hinges, the door was carried in with a crash.

The men rushed into the room on the heels of the intrepid detective, and then momentarily recoiled as a terrible sight met their gaze.

Only half-dressed, with his white hair and meager limbs flying about, but apparently with superhuman strength, the madman already had the gigantic negro in his irresistible clutch, in spite of the latter's Herculean efforts in his self-defense, and foaming at the mouth, gnashing his teeth, was apparently pounding him to death with a short-handled plumber's sledge-hammer.

"Curse your black hide!" screamed the maniac, punctuating every word with a terrible blow; "you'd discover my secrets, in order to betray and ruin me, would you? Hireling! dog! ape! I'll hammer you into bloody meat and pudding, if I hang for it a million fold!"

"Quick! have a strait jacket in readiness!" cried Old Grip. "Mind out for his hammer, though."

With that he leaped forward to get possession of the terrible weapon, when a random blow from the same grazed his shoulder with sufficient force to send him staggering back.

"Help, help!" shouted the bleeding victim, in a fainter voice. "Will no one save me? Help, help! He is killing me! Grab his arm! It is the same hammer with which I saw him kill Count Montalbert!"

CHAPTER L.

THE CLEARING UP.

THIS fearful announcement on the part of the madman's victim seemed to complete the panic and helplessness of the appalled onlookers, with the single exception of the veteran detective.

A second spring was more successful than the first.

In spite of the unearthly strength that seemed to possess the maniac, and which had rendered even the giant janitor little more than a child in his frenzied grasp, the case was different when he was fairly clutched from behind by such an expert athlete as Old Grip.

Almost in a twinkling he was disarmed, and face down upon the carpet, his wrists behind his back, the detective's iron knee planted like a pile-driver between his shoulder-blades.

In a few minutes the captive was strait-jacketed, after which the reaction set in, and he fainted away, weak and limp as a rag, as they laid him out on a couch.

Then the detective turned to the negro, whose hurts had been by this time somewhat ministered to.

He was lying upon the floor, still conscious. The blood had been washed from his wounds, which were found to be as serious as they were numerous; though he would probably recover, the proverbial thickness of the African skull having doubtless alone enabled him to survive the tremendous sledge-hammering he had received.

The vigorous and practical action of Old Grip in the premises had constituted him an authority which even the policemen were willing enough to acknowledge.

At a sign from him the bystanders drew to one side, and he calmly approached the prestrate janitor.

"Can you recognize me?" he asked.

"Why, yes, boss!" replied the sufferer, distinctly. "I remembers you, Mr. Crimmins."

"You seem able to talk without much pain?"

"It ain't de talkin' what pains, boss. It's dem hammer-licks. Gostalmighty! I feel as if I war all caved in 'bout de mug an' neck."

"What did you mean by that charge you made against Mr. Goldkirk just before I succeeded in rescuing you?"

"Jest what I dene said, boss."

"That the adventurer, sometimes known as Count Montalbert, came to his death at Mr. Goldkirk's hands?"

"De troof, 'fore de Lord, boss! But I will say dat I tink Marse Goldkirk war jest as mad as when he done tackled me."

"You saw him commit this crime?"

"Sure!"

"How came you to witness it?"

"I s'pected somethin' wrong, so, instead ob takin' anoder night off, I hid in de curtain space betwixt dis heah bedroom an' 'de nex' room, which am de buffet-room whar dey keeps de wine an' ice-box."

"De count he done come in dere 'bout midnight. He war powerful gay, while Boss Goldkirk, he—well, he wa'n't."

"De count he'd been gamblin' an' had bu'sted

a faro lay-out. He laughed, drank good deal ob de wine, an' at las' he done pile up de little table in dere wid bank-notes an' gold-pieces."

"Bimeby de boss an' de count dey got to quarrelin'. Or radder de boss war awful 'cited while de count he war cool an' tantalin'."

"It seemed all 'bout some letter which de count purfessed to hab an' which placed Boss Goldkirk in his power."

"Den it war also 'bout de count's gwine to marry Miss Blanche, de boss's daughter, an' de way he gwine to make de money fly when he done got de young leddy."

"Purty soon de count he done got jess too aggerwatin' to live, dat am de hull troof."

"Den de boss he done snap his gold toof-pick outen his han' so it done fly on to de flo' as de count was 'bout tiltin' back de head to take in a fresh snifter ob dat nice wine."

"De boss got up an' purtended to reach down fur dat toof-pick. But when he done rise up de hammer war in his han' what he must have put under dat werry table some time before. It war de same hammer what he belted me wif."

"Well, jess den de count war tiltin' his head back, an' den Boss Goldkirk let him hab it on de back ob de skull."

"Julium Caesar! but dat war a crack. It bu'sted in de hull back ob de head, an' dere didn't seem to be any need ob de way de boss kept a-poundin' away on de pore count's head arter he war down. No man but a crazy man would have done dat way."

"Well, de count he war deader dan a doah-nail, his hull crust bu'sted in."

"Den de boss done search de body. It war awfulest dan before. He done find a pack ob letter, but I s'pect de one he kill de count to get back wa'n't among 'em. It looked like dat de count he had done fool de ole man into t'inkin' he had it, an' in dat way had tempted his own fate."

"De boss tuk on awful for awhile. Bimeby, dough, he got cooled down. Den he hide away de body, an' all de count's money wid de body. Dar wa'n't much blood on de cahpet. It war a slick job. Dat am de troof, an' nuffin' but de troof, s'elp me!"

The appalling story had been listened to in horrified silence, without a single interruption on the part of any one of its numerous auditors.

"You say he hid away the body?" cried the detective.

"Dat am de troof, boss."

"Where did he hide it?"

"Golly! Boss Goldkirk's head war lebel dere. He done hid de body whar it would keep till he done got ready to plant it in de groun', I suppose."

"But where?"

"In de ice-house."

"The ice-house?"

"Yes; in de big ice-closet, or rerfrigrumater, in de buffet-room."

"I know the place," interposed the cashier, in a low voice. "Mr. Goldkirk had it fitted up for the preservation of our best wines and liquors, and it is big enough to stow away two or three bodies in for that matter. Come!"

They proceeded under his guidance to inspect the refrigerator.

There, sure enough, and in a condition sufficiently confirmatory of the details afforded by the janitor, the body of the murdered adventurer was found, together with the treasure which represented his last desperate gains on earth.

One of the bank-directors, an old and rather firm-looking gentleman, who was among the group, pressed forward, his eyes fixed upon the piteous spectacle.

"Who was this man?" he asked. "Intimate as have been my business relations with our unfortunate president—for I shall persist in believing him more unfortunate than guilty—I do not remember any Count Montalbert among his acquaintances and associates."

"I knew something of the man, but not much," Mr. Manly took it upon himself to reply. "He was socially intimate with Mr. Goldkirk of late, much to the surprise of myself and others, who looked upon the man with distrust. But matters are beginning to clear up a little now, and, from what we have just listened to, I doubt not that the general verdict will agree with yours, Mr. Fallman—that is that Mr. Goldkirk was worried to madness by an unprincipled adventurer, and that he is to be considered more unfortunate than guilty in the deplorable affair."

"I can make this matter still clearer, gentlemen," interposed Old Grip.

They looked up to him with the deepest attention and respect.

"I understand, as a preliminary," continued the detective, "that I am still the sole accredited detective in the employ of the Occidental National Bank for the production of the criminal or criminals engaged in the recent robbery of the institution's vaults, and the recovery of the proceeds of that robbery, with such reward in view as has already been offered by the board of directors for the promotion of those praiseworthy objects. Do I state my case understandingly?"

Mr. Manly bowed gravely, while Mr. Director Fallman said:

"Certainly, Mr. Crimmins. You are still our accredited agent in the affair."

"Good, and thank you!" continued Old Grip. "The robber of your bank is represented by the lifeless remains of this desperate man before us. I am ready to afford substantial proof of his guilt, together with a return to the institution of the entire abstracted funds, cash and bonds, intact, in the course of let me say one hour hence."

Accompanied by the cashier, Mr. Fallman, the private policeman employed by the bank, and a police roundsman who was present, the detective forthwith proceeded to the building known as the Etna Steam Laundry.

Leading them to the entrance of the tunnel at the bottom of the pit, where the faithful Peters, with Cheese-it at his side, was found still mounting guard, he called the former to one side.

"Have you secured the Castro letter?" he whispered.

"It is in my pocket," was the reply. "Gentlemen!" called out the detective; "be pleased to follow me. The stolen treasure and promised proof as to the identity of the criminal are here."

The recovered treasure was accordingly formally taken in charge by the bank officials, together with the dead man's diary containing, among much other interesting matter, his detailed confession of the crime to the minutest particular.

"Mr. Crimmins," said Mr. Director Fallman, taking the detective's hand at parting, "though a formal investigation of these extraordinary disclosures will be first in order, I can safely congratulate you in the name of my financial associates, and say definitely that the reward offered by our institution for these discoveries—ten thousand dollars—will be at your disposal within a few days."

CHAPTER LI. DENOUEMENT.

ABOUT three months after the incidents recounted in the last chapter, Claude Markham and his wife, accompanied by Old Grip, formally betook themselves to the palatial residence of Mr. Clifford Goldkirk, ex-president of the Occidental National Bank.

Luella would have gladly accompanied the trio, but succumbed to the reflection that her presence might be somewhat supererogatory in the piece of private business that was in hand.

Many changes had taken place in those three months, as an aftermath of the harvest of developments evolved by our tragic and complicated tale.

The Etna Steam Laundry was a thing of the past, save as memorable instance of what methodized structures may be reared by the cunning and cleverness of criminal intent, backed by intellectual force, as a long-unsuspected mask for its own nefarious and multifarious ends; for the laundry had actually paid as a business venture, apart from its darker and subtler purpose as designated by its promoter, and it had become generally and wonderingly known, chiefly through admissions on the part of Dick Jelliffe, that Mrs. Griscom was but another *alias* of the master-adventurer, Jud Jelliffe, *alias* Moresby, *alias* Montalbert, *et al.*; though it was still but dimly comprehended how he had enacted such an inherently difficult rôle, in addition to so many others, with the success that might scarcely have been interrupted at all, but for the fatal defect that found him out in his more ambitious and dashing schemes.

The detective had secured his reward, and, if he owed more to luck and the chance drift of circumstances than to his individual acumen and expertness in this particular instance, his success was another trophy in the list of his long and hard-earned triumphs.

Of course Luella shared in this added luster to her husband's renown, and was made glad and happy in proportion as it redounded to the respect and admiration in which he was held.

The diminutive but redoubtable Cheese-it did not fail to come in for his full share of approval in the general *dénouement* to which he had contributed his appreciable element of elucidation, and was still a favorite of Mrs. Crimmins and the apple of his distinguished principal's regard.

"Manchester Mat," or Matthew Peters, who had been a sailor in his younger days, had been assisted, through Old Grip's influence, to the position of first mate on a fine bark in the China trade. At the latest accounts, he was doing nobly in his honest employment.

Dick Jelliffe, the whilom engineer of the steam laundry, and who had not appeared to have any culpable connection with his infamous relative's designs, had returned to England, where he was understood to have become an industrious and hard-working "driver" on the Midland Railway.

As for the Markham couple, Claude's good name had at last been so thoroughly and triumphantly vindicated that he was profitably employed in a confidential position with a large manufacturing firm, and the present visit of the pair to Mr. Goldkirk was in the nature of

a settlement of their long-standing and just grievance against that unenviable individual in a way that is about to be disclosed.

And what of Mr. Goldkirk?

Recovered from his attack of insanity, and relieved on that plea from accountability for Jelliffe's death by a coroner's jury, he was now a hopeless, broken-down invalid in his luxurious home, broken in health, weakened in spirit, and, let us hope, contrite and penitent over the follies, mistakes, meannesses and indulgences of his soulless and hypocritical past.

The visitors were expected, and the miserable millionaire received them while reclining in his invalid's chair, a pallid, emaciated and trembling wreck of his whilom confident and ostentatious self.

By tacit consent, the detective was the accredited spokesman of his party.

"Mr. Goldkirk," he said, "I suppose you understand that we are here in response to a request from your confidential lawyer, in your behalf, for the negotiation of a certain Montevidean letter at present in Mrs. Markham's possession?"

The banker bowed his head, and then signed to a servant, who silently quitted the room.

"Wait, if you please," he said, in a low but distinct voice. "My lawyer is in waiting. Ah, he is here!"

The legal gentleman, a prominent member of the profession, introduced himself in a few words. Then he said:

"It is but natural that my client should anxiously desire the return to him of the incriminating document in this lady's possession. At the same time, he recognizes her right to its custody, and would merely negotiate for its return at whatever reasonable price may be fixed upon it. Do I state your views correctly, Mr. Goldkirk?"

The banker nodded.

"The matter is then simple enough," continued the lawyer. "It is now a mere question of yes or no on the lady's part as to whether or not she will part with the paper for a consideration."

Old Grip was about to reply, when Maud interposed a slight gesture.

"Wait, if you please," she said, with calm dignity. "Before saying yes or no to the proposed bargaining, I would like to put a few questions to Mr. Goldkirk personally, and judge dispassionately of the value of whatever responses he may see fit to make."

The lawyer began to say that he did not think his client's health sufficiently robust, when the banker interposed by a weak but impatient movement.

"By your leave, N—, I shall be the judge of that," he said; and then facing the young wife, with something like a flush of shame in his transparent cheeks, he said, firmly: "Mrs. Markham, I freely acknowledge that I have injured your husband and yourself cruelly, perhaps irreparably. Now proceed with your questions, if you please."

Both Maud and Claude looked not a little surprised, but the former did not waste time.

"You acknowledge, sir, before these gentlemen," she said, "the long series of persecutions with which you have pursued, first myself individually, afterward my husband, Claude Markham, in conjunction with myself, cruelly, maliciously and persistently?"

"I do," in a low, distinct voice, and with bowed head.

"Your cause or animus for this?—I demand it!"

"Jealousy!—I loved you to madness—the love of an old man, perhaps, but none the less powerful and engrossing for that."

"Would you venture to say that this excuses your conduct in your own estimation?"

"Good God! no; far from it. There was a time when I deluded myself into the belief that it did. You now behold me the victim, the ruined, broken victim, no less of self-detestation than of self-humiliation; so much so that I dare not look you nor look Claude Markham in the face!"

"You may find it difficult to make us believe this."

"What can I do to prove my sincerity?" helplessly. "Heaven knows that I see my detestable conduct toward you both in its true and hideous light at last!"

"But even granting the sincerity of your repentance, what amends, what recompense is this for what we have suffered at your hands?"

"None! I know there is none," despairingly. "There is the curse, the torture of it!"

"Can you blame us—me—for feeling resentful and unforgiving, then?"

"No, no; God knows I cannot think of such a thing!"

"Why then should you have commissioned this learned gentleman here to negotiate for the transfer from our hands to yours of the one last weapon remaining to us by which we can at pleasure glut our just vengeance upon you to the full?"

"I don't know—I thought—I feared—I hoped—But this is too terrible! I cannot bear it!"

And the broken worldling covered his face

with his hands, the tears trickling out between the thin, transparent fingers with silent eloquence.

Maud's lips tightened and her bosom heaved, while even Claude Markham showed evidences of contemptuous pity.

The detective was immovable as bronze, while the lawyer drew pen and ink lines upon a slip of paper he had drawn toward him over the surface of the richly ornamented writing-table at which he seated himself with a calmly judicial air.

"Enough of this," continued Maud, in a clear, hard voice. "Sir," to the lawyer, "what consideration are you commissioned by Mr. Goldkirk to make me for the surrender of what is known among us as the Castro letter?"

"A check for fifty thousand dollars," was the prompt reply.

She drew the letter from her bosom.

"Yonder is a gas-jet close by Mr. Goldkirk's head," she said. "Will some one please light it? I want Mr. Goldkirk to identify this letter without its leaving my hands."

The gas was lighted accordingly.

She advanced, holding the letter spread out page by page, with the yellow light striking strongly upon its contents, while the invalid struggled into a half-sitting posture to devour them with his hollow and eager eyes.

At last the identification was complete. He fell back with a sigh, his trembling hands opening and clutching convulsively where they had fallen at his sides.

"You identify the letter?" demanded the young woman, in the same hard voice.

"Yes, yes! Oh, God! that I must relinquish it—that this accursed letter must remain in another's possession!"

"And this is the letter you offer me fifty thousand dollars to render up to you?"

"Yes, yes!" with wild eagerness.

"Look you, I am no blackmailer. Therefore I refuse to sell what I can bestow. See! it is yours—and destruction's."

And she calmly held the letter in the flame till the last shred of it dropped from her hand into a cuspidore, wholly consumed.

Claude had known his wife too well to be surprised, but even the iron detective drew a long, hissing breath, like an unsyllabled protest, while the lawyer suddenly rose to his feet in his astonishment.

As for Goldkirk, he started up again with starting eyes and a great, hollow cry.

"It isn't possible!" he gasped. "She can't be human!" And he again fell back, exhausted.

Maud turned indifferently to quit the room with her companions, when Mr. N—, who had bent his ear to his client's lips, called upon her peremptorily to stay.

"One moment!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Goldkirk begs to be permitted to make you and your husband a slight gift in appreciation for your unparalleled generosity, if you will promise to accept it."

After a hesitating exchange of glances with her husband and the detective, the young woman gave the required promise.

The lawyer hurried to the table, filled out a check, and supported the banker on his arm while the latter affixed his signature to the same.

"A mere trifle!" said the lawyer, blotting the writing, folding up the paper, and respectfully handing it to Maud. "But you have gladdened my client's heart by deigning to accept it—and pray remember that an accepted gift cannot be returned."

The visitors then withdrew.

"Let us take a look at that check," suggested the detective, with a curious air, when they were outside the house.

They inspected the repentant banker's gift together; and then the young couple silently clasped hands, while Old Grip testified his congratulation with a hearty slap on the back between Claude Markham's shoulder-blades.

It was a check for one hundred thousand dollars!

The millionaire's daughter is about the only one left to dispose of, and it is a sad duty to have to say that Hymen did that for her, with but little improvement in the foreign nobility line that was so dear to the young beauty's sentimental heart.

Six months later she made a runaway match with a reputed Italian marquis, of dazzling externals and a poetic address, who turned out to be a Milanese restaurant waiter of more ambition than ancestry, and less ducats than assurance, who is now busily engaged in making the banker's money fly right royally.

Blanche is self-sacrificingly assisting him at the arduous task, having accepted her disenchantment with a better grace than might be expected.

As for Goldkirk himself, he is failing fast, both physically and mentally, and cannot last long.

He is one of the sort with whom money constitutes the soul; when that is gone, or is going, there is little left for them to live for, and they might as well step down and out.

THE END.

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